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GLADIATORS

The Real Story
of the Ring

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TISP SPECIALS

Gladiator reenactors
clash in the dust of the
1,900-year-old Roman
arena in Arles, France.



GLADIATORS

The Real Story of the Ring

ANDREW CURRY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RÉMI BÉNALI



NATIONAL
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WASHINGTON, D.C.





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Previous pages: Built around A.D. 240, the amphitheater of ancient Thysdrus—located in modern-day El Djem, Tunisia—once accommodated 35,000 fans.

Left: Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting "Pollice Verso," meaning "turned thumb," influenced many later gladiator portrayals.

Introduction

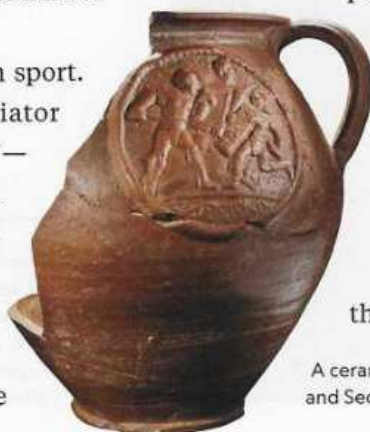
Around 500 B.C., the Italian Peninsula was occupied by a collection of squabbling tribes and city-states—Campanians and Etruscans, Samnites and Greeks. Within a few centuries one had risen to rule them all: the Romans, whose military prowess and aggressive culture propelled them from a village on the banks of the Tiber River to control all of Italy by around 200 B.C.

Over the following 400-some years, Roman legions marched relentlessly in all directions. At the point of their gladius—the Roman catchall term for sword—they conquered nation after nation. Eventually their reputation was such that most local rulers they met hastened to pay homage—and taxes—to the Roman emperor, betting it was better to join than to resist. By 200 A.D., the city of Rome sat at the center of an empire that, at its height, stretched from the banks of the Nile to the forests of Germany, from the hills of Scotland to the deserts of Libya.

As Rome grew, so did its fascination with sport. The most popular events were the gladiator games. Gladiators—literally “sword men”—were trained fighters, the boxers or mixed martial artists of their era, who engaged in single combat for the entertainment of crowds of fans. They came from all ranks of society—prisoners of war, enslaved people, and freeborn Romans—and all of them gave

up their rights as a condition of becoming gladiators. The risks were huge: They could be wounded or, on rare occasions, even killed in the arena, the sand-strewn oval where their fights were staged. Although an uncommon outcome, it was always a possibility, as reflected in the gladiator’s standard oath: “I will endure to be burned, to be bound, to be beaten, and to be killed by the sword.” There were rewards, too. If they fought well, they could win fame, gold, and perhaps even their freedom.

Even the Romans weren’t sure when and where gladiator combat originated: Some contemporary authors traced it back to ancient Etruscan funerals, where prisoners of war were supposedly sacrificed in single combat. Others thought the custom originated with



A ceramic pot depicts two gladiators, Thelonicus and Sedulus, fighting in front of their trainer.

A reenactor in Arles, France, dons the characteristic armor of a *secutor*-style gladiator. It took gladiators years of training to fight well in the arena.



Working with archaeologists, gladiator reenactors in Arles, France, reconstruct the fighting style of ancient gladiators—and entertain thousands of tourists each year.







Animal fights and staged hunts were part of gladiator programs, as depicted in this first-century B.C. fresco.

the Samnites, an enemy tribe the Romans overcame around 300 B.C. "It was their ancient custom," one Roman historian claimed, "to enliven their banquets with bloodshed, and to combine with their feasting the horrid sight of armed men fighting; often the combatants fell dead above the very cups of the revelers, and their tables were stained with streams of blood."

Over the course of centuries, an obscure tradition turned into a cultural touchstone. It's no exaggeration to say gladiators were a defining obsession of Roman culture and life. The earliest recorded gladiator fights in Rome took place in 264 B.C., when Roman general Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus pitted three pairs of helmeted fighters against one another in honor of his late father.

From those early days of the empire until Rome was sacked by rampaging Visigoths more than six centuries later, Romans thrilled to ever more spectacular gladiatorial fights. Nearly every sizable Italian city and town had an arena, some large enough to seat 20,000 spectators or more. Their ruins can still be visited today, in towns like Capua, Pompeii, and Pozzuoli. The Colosseum, the largest of the amphitheaters, took up a huge swath of central Rome and could seat 50,000—about as many fans as can fit into Yankee Stadium in New York.

And wherever Romans conquered, amphitheaters—the oval buildings built specifically to host gladiator fights that give our modern stadia their shape, floor plan, and seating arrangements—sprang up soon thereafter. "They put up tons of these things

as symbols of Roman military might," says Katherine Welch, an archaeologist and art historian at New York University. "They were statements."

But they were more than that. The bloody games provided entertainment for Roman troops, greased the wheels of local politics, and proved popular with new additions to the Roman world eager to adopt Roman customs. As Rome conquered its neighbors to the east, the theaters of the Greek world were often converted into makeshift arenas, with barriers installed to keep the big cats that also entertained at the games from jumping into the stands.

Some scholars argue that gladiators were *the* defining Roman obsession. In an empire that granted citizenship to Egyptians and Brits, Spaniards and

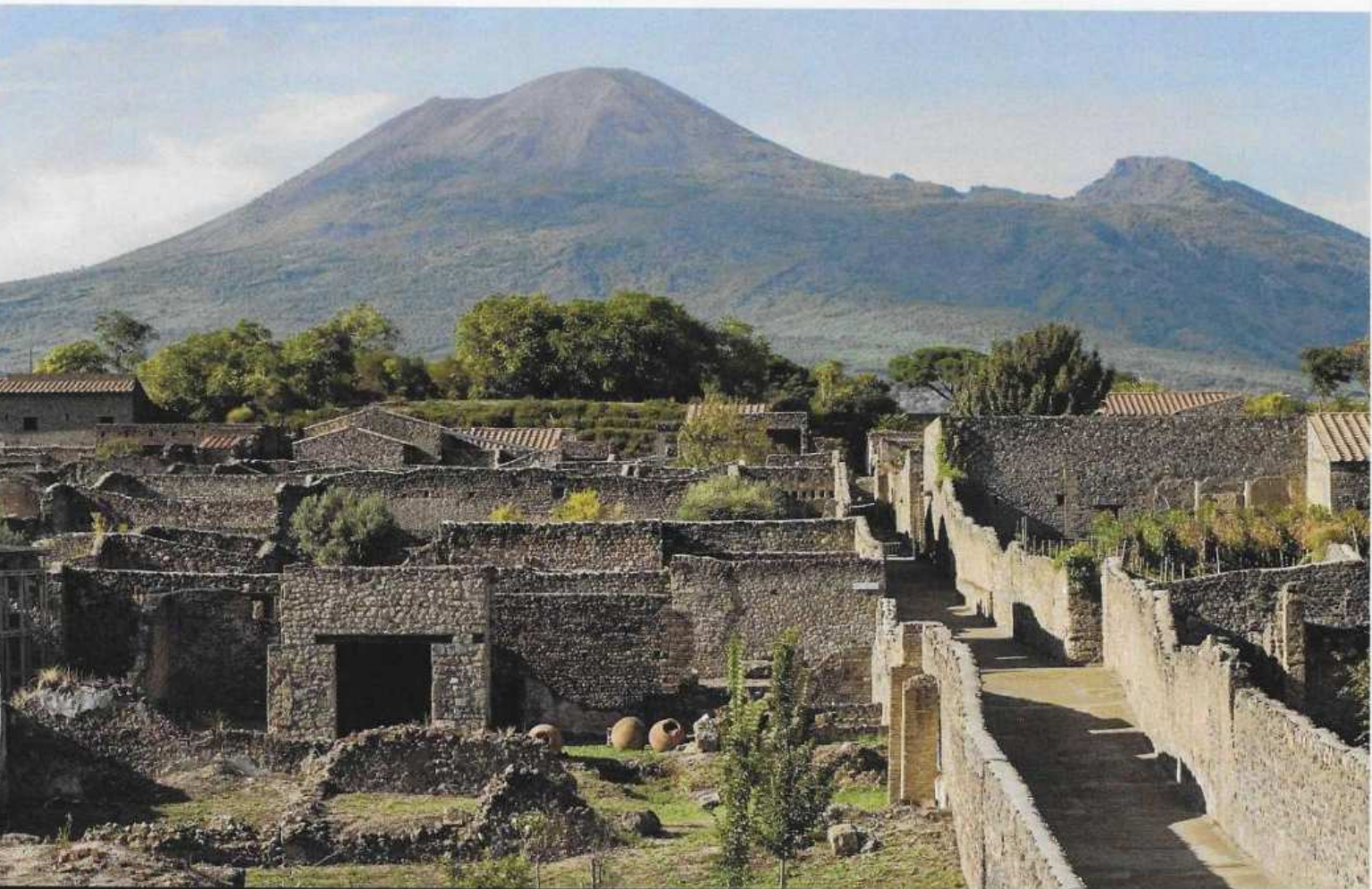


An oil lamp depicting a fallen gladiator may have been a prized souvenir.

Greeks, Syrians and Germans, gladiators were one of the few things all Romans had in common. "Roman-style games had a much greater impact than people wanted to believe," says Jonathan Coulston, an archaeologist at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "It's not just about blood and sports. It's a reinforcement of Roman civilization."

The gladiator fights reflected Roman society—what they valued, what they believed, who they worshipped. Officially, gladiators were the lowest of the low, social outcasts at the very bottom of ancient Rome's rigidly hierarchical society. But brave performances in the arena could transform them into popular heroes and even earn them freedom.

Archaeologists have found armor and equipment belonging to gladiators in the ruins of Pompeii.





ATLANTIC
OCEAN

North
Sea

DENMARK

RUSSIA

POLAND

Germania

MAGNA
GERMANIA
12 B.C. - A.D. 9

GERMANY

GERMANIA
INFERIOR
BEL. Colonia Agrippinensis

Bonna

Mogontiacum

LUX.

Augusta Treverorum

GERMANIA
SUPERIOR

Argentoratum

Augusta Vindelicum

Augusta

Vindobona (Vienna)

Brigetto

Caruntum

Aquincum

Budapest

GERMANIA
INFERIOR

Noviomagus

Camulodunum

Portus Itius

Dubrae

Noviomagus

Isca Silurum

Isca Dumnoniorum

Londonium (London)

Viroconium

Deva

Eboracum

Lindum

UNITED KINGDOM

Hadrian's Wall

Caledonia

IRELAND

Hibernia

NETHERLANDS

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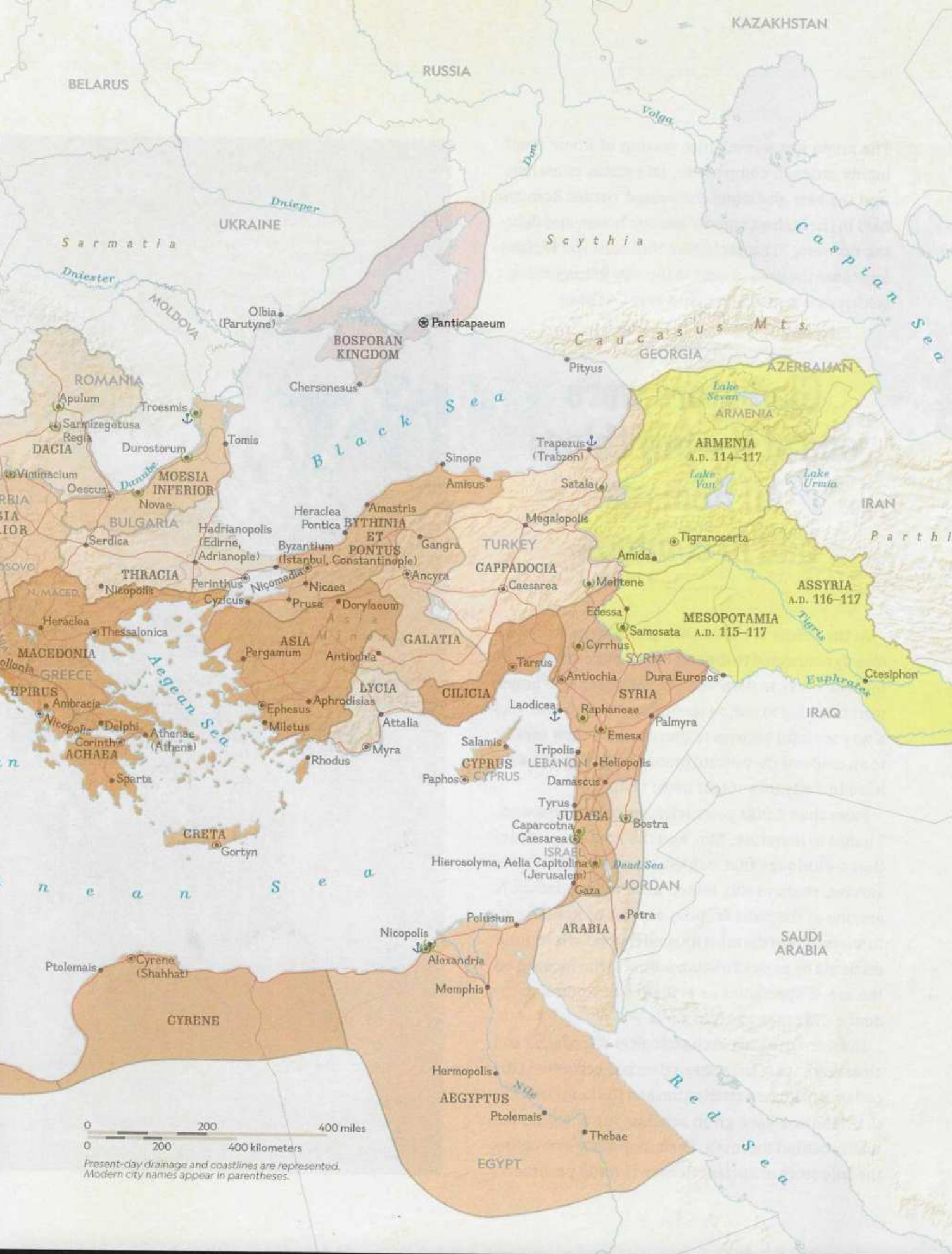
Hibernia

NETHERLANDS

GERMANIA
INFERIOR

Noviomagus

Camulodunum



0 200 400 miles
0 200 400 kilometers

Present-day drainage and coastlines are represented.
Modern city names appear in parentheses.

The arena was a miniature version of Rome itself: highly ordered, competitive, and status conscious. And the best gladiators showcased virtues Romans held in the highest regard: bravery, honor, and fighting prowess. “The gladiators that earn the highest kudos are the ones closest to the way Roman citizen soldiers are armed and fight,” says Coulston.

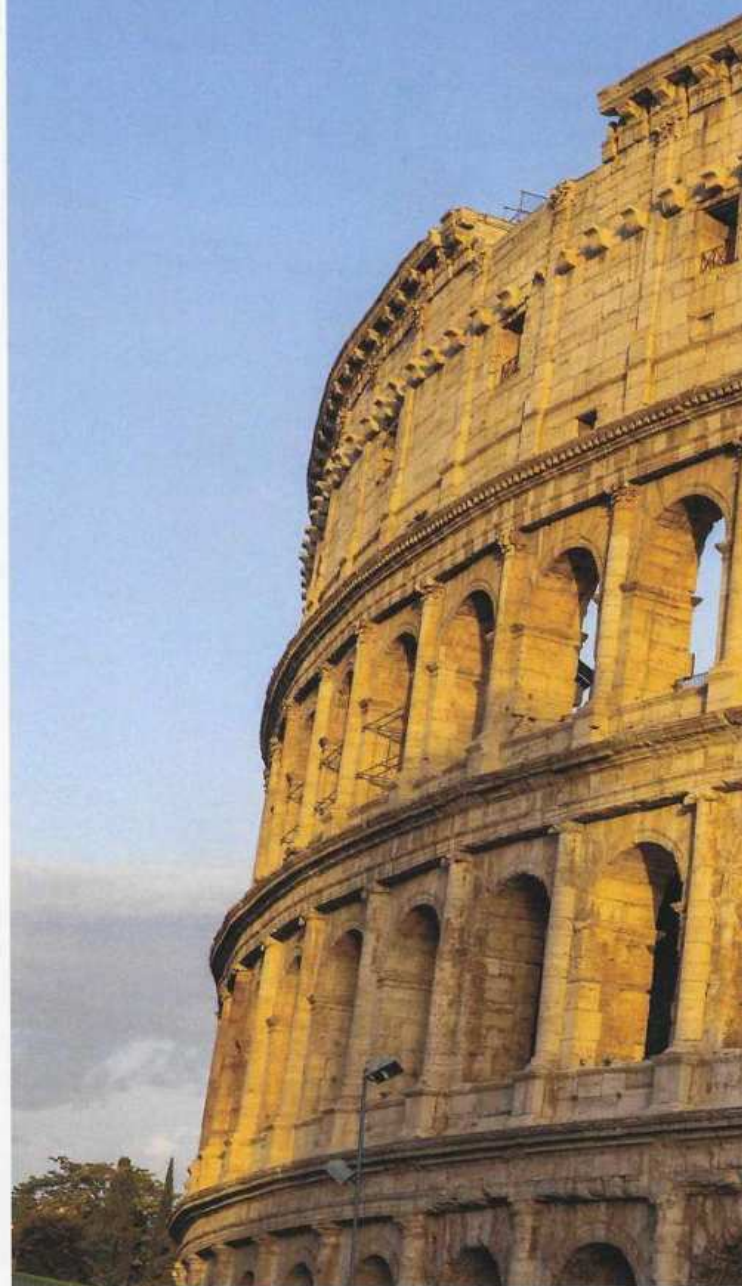
Gladiators were one of the few things all Romans had in common.

At the height of the empire, gladiator games were closely connected to the cult of the emperor: Attending was a way to demonstrate belonging to a larger world. Paying to put on spectacles, meanwhile, was a way for local bigwigs to demonstrate their loyalty to an emperor they would probably never meet, who lived in a city they might never visit.

More than 2,000 years later, we’re still obsessed. Thanks to literature, film, and the Roman construction techniques that helped many amphitheaters survive, recognizably intact, until today, gladiators are one of the most familiar aspects of Roman culture, and one of the most misunderstood. (Here, lurid accounts by early Christian authors who focused on the arena spectacles as evidence of Rome’s decadence and cruelty played a role.)

In recent decades, archaeological discoveries and close readings of the scattered texts that survived the collapse of Roman civilization and the long Dark Age that followed have given scholars insights into the reality behind the myth. Their findings are revealing the true story of ancient Rome’s favorite pastime.

Rome’s Flavian Amphitheater, commonly known as the Colosseum, was built more than 1,900 years ago to host gladiator fights.







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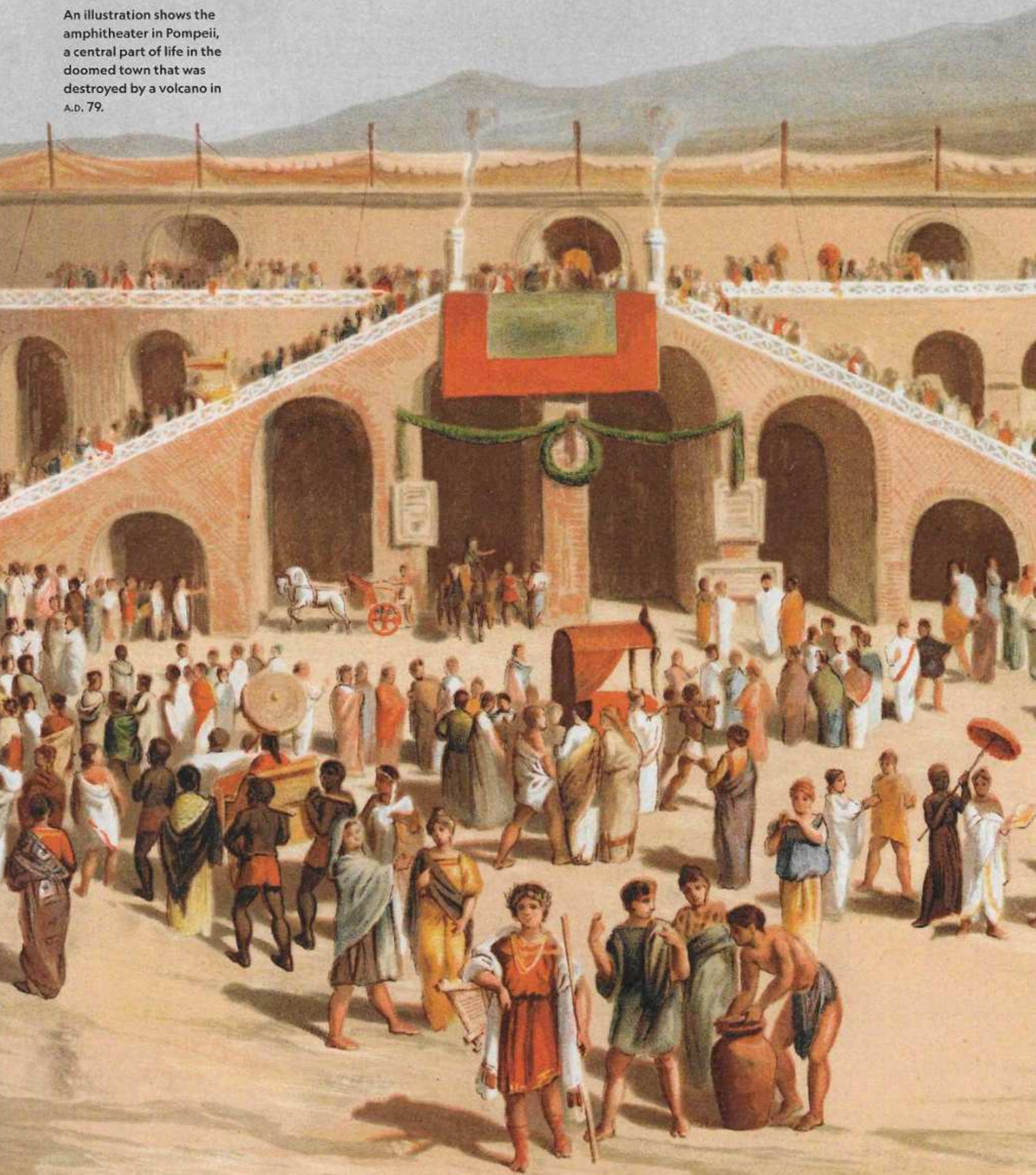
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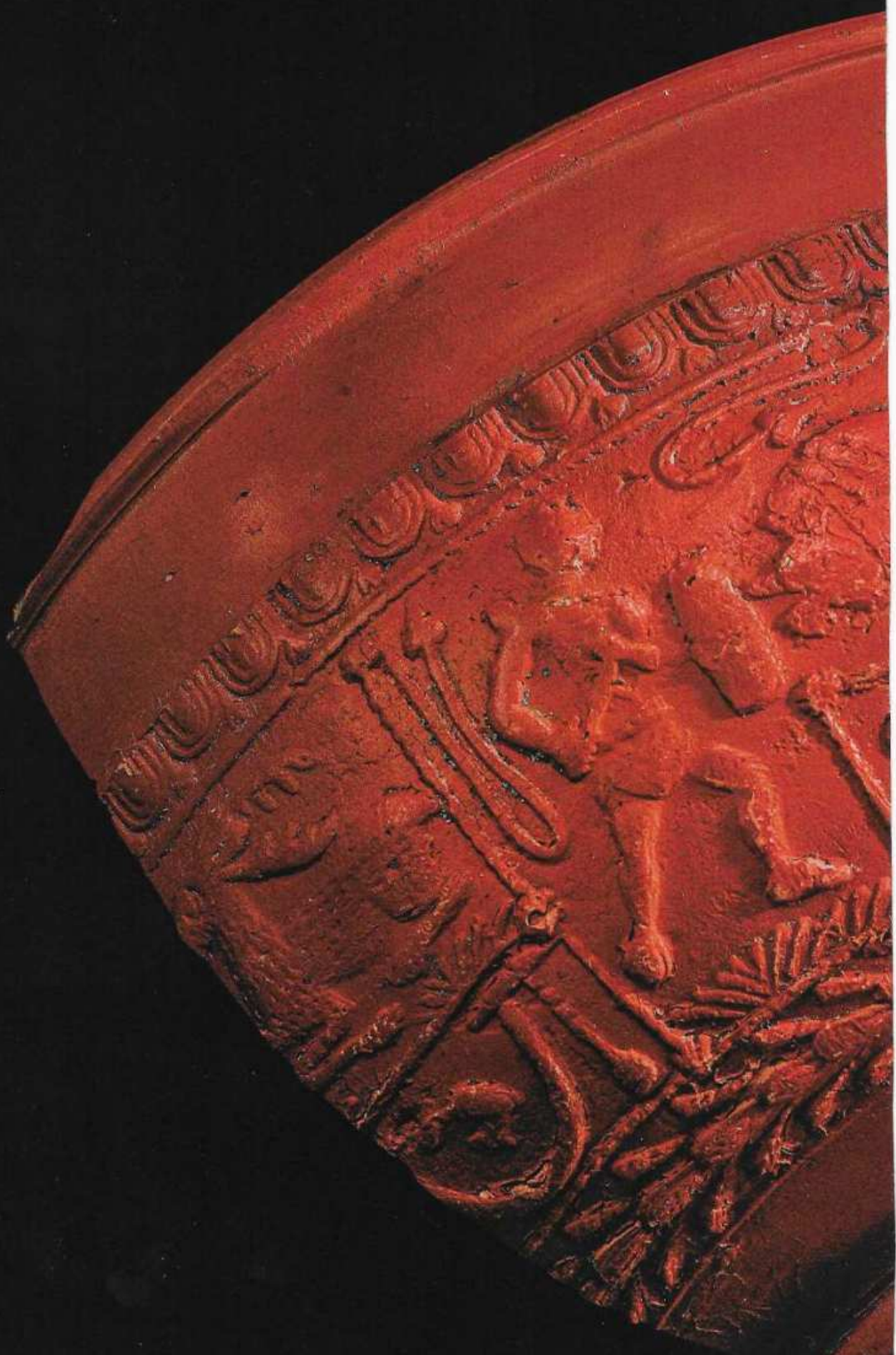


Previous pages: Gladiator bouts were not free-for-alls: Referees, depicted in a third-century A.D. mosaic on either side of the fighters, kept a close eye on combatants to ensure fair fights.

An illustration shows the amphitheater in Pompeii, a central part of life in the doomed town that was destroyed by a volcano in A.D. 79.







The Romans enjoyed watching trained hunters fight bulls and other dangerous animals, as seen on this first-century A.D. pot found in France.





Gladiator reenactors pose amid Roman-era ruins in Arles, France. The equipment they use is based on archaeological finds.

CHAPTER I

Ancient Rome's Main Attraction

For more than 600 years, Romans flocked to gladiator games. Recent research reveals what life behind the shield was like for these famous fighters.



Dressed in the armor of a *provocator*, two fighters prepare to do battle in the arena of the Roman-era Arles amphitheater.





T

THE TUNNEL UNDER the Roman amphitheater in Arles, France, is dark and cool. The shade is a welcome relief from the blazing Mediterranean sun beating down on the amphitheater's dusty arena floor and stone bleachers.

The gladiator helmet I've just donned, on the other hand, is stifling. A replica of the head protection worn by a Roman gladiator almost 2,000 years ago, the dented, scratched helmet weighs more than 13 pounds (6 kg)—three times as heavy as a football helmet and far less comfortable. It has a tangy metallic smell, as though I've put my head inside a sweaty penny.

Through the bronze grate covering my eyes, I can make out a pair of men in loincloths warming up for a fight. Metal armguards jingle as one bounces on the balls of his feet, his stubby, hooked sword clutched in a leather-gloved hand. As I shift uncomfortably,

his partner lifts his sword and offers to hit me in the head, just to demonstrate how solid the helmet is.

I shrug. Anything for a story, right? Then their trainer, a deeply tanned, wiry Frenchman named Brice Lopez, intervenes. "He's not trained for it," says Lopez sharply. "He doesn't have the muscles. You'd snap his neck."

A former French police officer and combat trainer with a black belt in jiu-jitsu, Lopez knows what a real fight looks like. Almost 30 years ago he took a detour into ancient fighting styles. After commissioning working reproductions of gladiator weapons and armor, he spent years thinking about how they'd be used in a fight to the death like the ones portrayed in countless movies and books about gladiators.

But the more he studied gladiator weaponry and armor, the less sense it made. Loaded down with their shields, metal guards for their legs and arms, and hefty, full-coverage bronze helmets, many gladiators

carried almost as much protective gear into the arena as Roman soldiers wore into battle. Yet their swords were typically less than a foot (30 cm) long, barely bigger than a chef's knife. "Why," Lopez asks, "would you bring 20 kilos [45 pounds] of protective gear to a knife fight?"

His conclusion: Gladiators weren't trying to kill each other; they were trying to keep each other alive. They spent years training to stage showy fights, most of which did not end in death. "It's a real competition, but not a real fight," says Lopez, who now runs a gladiator reenactment troupe called ACTA Sarl. "There's no choreography, but there is good intent—you're not my adversary, you're my partner. Together we have to make the best show possible."

Over the past two decades, researchers have unearthed evidence that backs up some of Lopez's take on gladiator combat and challenges the popular

EMPEROR COMMODUS, GLADIATOR SUPERFAN

Roman emperor Commodus—fictionalized as the preening villain played by Joaquin Phoenix in the Ridley Scott film *Gladiator*—was in reality the ultimate gladiator fan.

Born in A.D. 161, he became emperor at the age of 17. By all accounts, he was far more interested in gladiator games and animal hunts than in the responsibilities of ruling Rome. Contemporary writers claim he used the Colosseum as his personal playground and dressed as a gladiator for public appearances. At one point, he even wanted to relocate from his imperial palace to a gladiator barracks.

Commodus was fond of displaying his prowess in the ring but made sure to take no unnecessary risks. He had a special platform built so he could

slay leopards and other beasts from a safe distance, and he gave the gladiators he fought wands instead of swords.

This obsession with gladiators rubbed many Roman elites the wrong way. Gladiators were fun to watch, but they were at the bottom of the social ladder. Playacting as one was considered beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen, let alone the emperor. "When he came into the amphitheater naked, took up arms, and fought as a gladiator," the historian Herodian wrote, "the people saw a disgraceful spectacle: A nobly born emperor of the Romans . . . disgracing his high position by degrading and disgusting exhibitions." Commodus was assassinated in A.D. 192, to the relief of many of his contemporaries.



A bust of the Roman emperor Commodus
(A.D. 161-192)

Romans thrilled to
gladiator fights for
nearly 600 years in
amphitheaters all
across the empire.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

*Items not to scale

1. LEG PROTECTOR

Elaborately decorated with storks fighting snakes, this leg protector was part of a pair worn by a *thraex*-style gladiator in Pompeii.

2. DAGGER

A short, steel-and-bone dagger called a *pugio* forced fighters to get close to their opponents.

3. SHIELD AND SPEAR

Eques gladiators, who began their fights on horseback, carried a bronze shield and spear into battle.

4. NECK PROTECTOR

Decorated with marine life, this high neck guard was worn on the shoulder by a *retiarius*, who fought with a net and trident.

5. MEDICAL SUPPLIES

Forceps were among the medical equipment found at Pompeii's gladiator school.



perception of these ancient spectacles. A few gladiators were criminals or prisoners of war condemned to punishment by combat, but most were professional fighters—the boxers, mixed martial arts fighters, or football players of their day. Some had families waiting for them outside the ring.

Being a gladiator could be lucrative, and was often a career choice, literary sources suggest. Brave performances in the arena could transform gladiators into popular heroes and even earn prisoners their freedom. Gladiators probably spent most of their time training or in exhibition games.

Perhaps the biggest surprise: Most matches didn't end in death. For every 10 gladiators who entered the ring, scholars estimate nine lived to fight another day.

FOR NEARLY 600 YEARS, Romans thrilled to gladiatorial fights. Tomb paintings and literary sources

suggest the tradition probably began around 300 B.C. as part of early funeral rituals. The first documented fights in the historical record were in 264 B.C., pitting six prisoners of war against one another during funeral celebrations in Rome.

Gladiators were a favorite subject of Roman artists, re-created in mosaics, frescoes, marble reliefs, glassware, clay trinkets, and bronze ornaments found all across the Roman world. Nearly every sizable city and town had an arena of its own, with about 300 documented from Britain to the deserts of Jordan. Staging fights eventually became tied up with worshipping the emperor, a key part of Roman identity.

These ancient contests also exert an irresistible pull on the modern imagination. Thanks to countless, often erroneous, portrayals in film and literature, gladiators are one of the most recognizable, but often misrepresented, aspects of Roman culture.

Gladiators sometimes carried more than 40 pounds (18 kg) of armor and equipment into the ring, almost as much as a Roman soldier.



The amphitheater
in Arles, France, was
built around A.D. 90.
It could hold 20,000
spectators and still
hosts bullfights today.





Roman writers spent surprisingly little time documenting the details of gladiator games, probably because they were so familiar. (How often do you write to your friends about what a hit is in baseball, or

Some of the best preserved evidence for gladiators comes from Pompeii.

how many players are on a football team?) To reconstruct the real story of the ring, archaeologists and historians have to find clues in art, at excavations, and by reading between the lines of ancient texts.

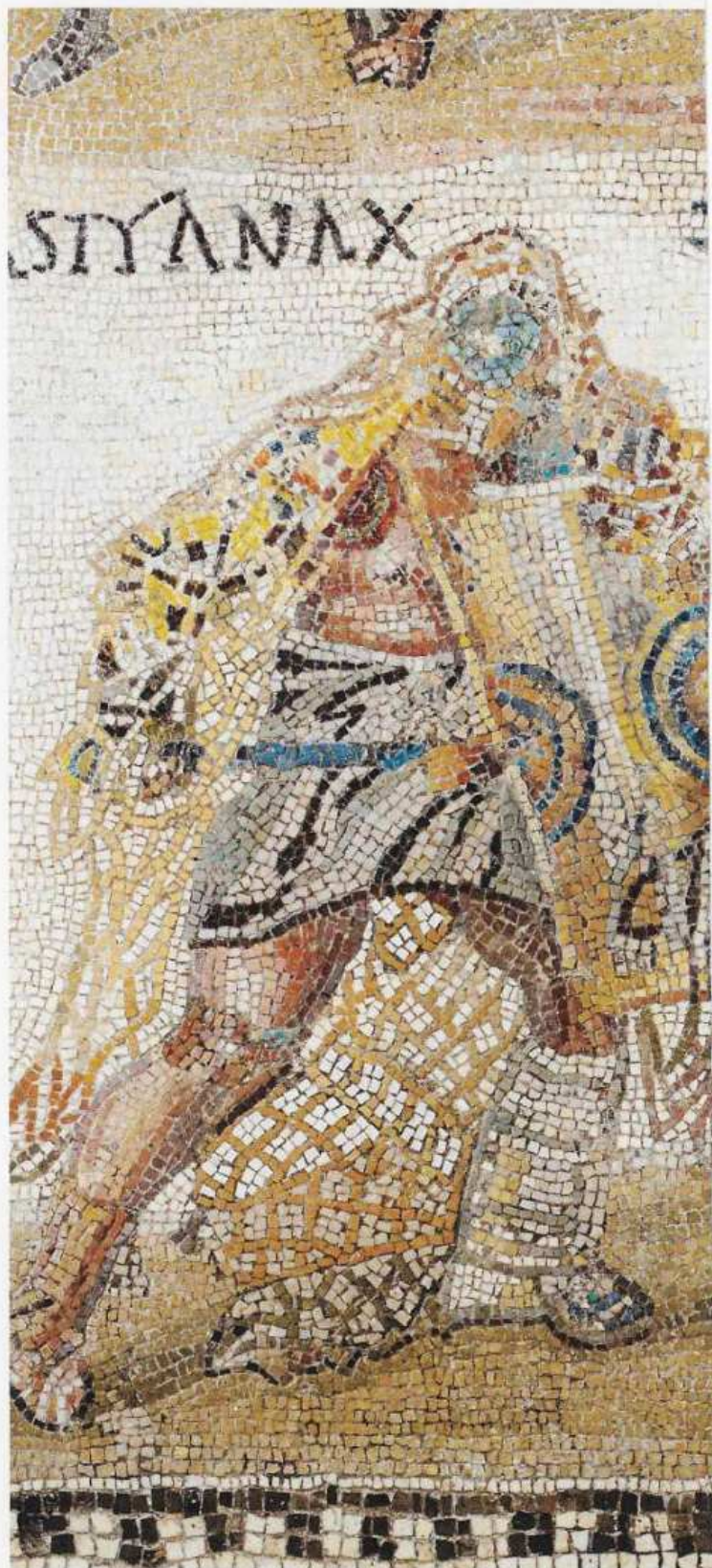
Like many things about ancient Rome, some of the best preserved evidence for gladiators comes from Pompeii, south of modern-day Naples, Italy. Once a thriving city, Pompeii was buried suddenly by a volcanic eruption in A.D. 79.

Walking the city's eerily well-preserved streets today, visitors see reminders of gladiator games everywhere. Most prominent is the 22,000-seat amphitheater on the east side of town, the brooding bulk



Left: This detailed bronze statuette of a gladiator from the first century A.D. features a removable faceplate and is just six inches (15 cm) tall.

Right: Under the watchful eye of a referee, a gladiator named Kalendio (center) fights another called Astyanax in this third-century A.D. mosaic. The symbol of Kalendio's name shows he was killed.





of Mount Vesuvius visible from the upper rows of seats. Built around 70 B.C., it's the oldest surviving amphitheater in the world, predating the Colosseum in Rome by a century. It's also the earliest known to be fashioned from stone—until the first century A.D., audiences usually watched gladiator games while seated on temporary bleachers made of wood that were set up in town squares or outside the city walls.

Faded advertisements in the city center plug upcoming fights. Mosaics and frescoes in the houses of rich Pompeians capture highlights of past matches. Just outside the city's theater, around the corner from the gladiator barracks, one can find stick-figure fighters scratched into faded red plaster at a child's eye level.

In 1766, early excavators uncovered a trove of gladiator armor at a site on the southern edge of town.

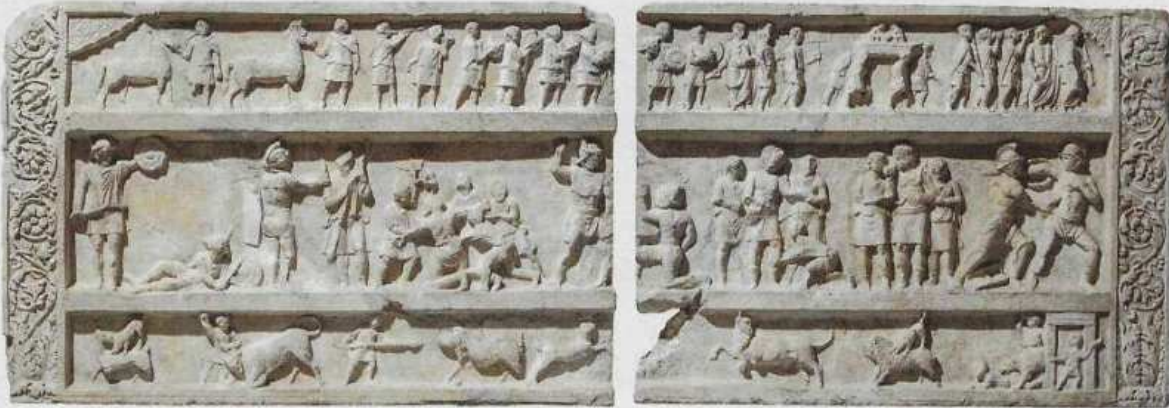
Situated just a short walk from the arena, further digs showed it was a makeshift gladiator barracks and training facility. After an earthquake damaged the city's original facility in A.D. 62, fighters and their trainers took over a space once the equivalent of an outdoor theater lobby.

Historians remain divided as to whether the small rooms facing the courtyard were locked, like prison cells, or were more like dorm rooms the fighters could enter and depart at will. Archaeologist Alain Genot of the Arles Museum of Antiquity, for example, argues that the extensive training and dramatic fighting style needed to be a successful gladiator couldn't have been forced. Proper performances in the ring depended on motivated, well-treated, and well-trained fighters: showmen, in other words, motivated by money and fame, not fear.

Gladiator graffiti was scratched on the walls of Pompeii's theater, not far from the city's gladiator training facility.



WHO PAID FOR IT?



Gladiators carved on the tomb of a rich Pompeiian, as seen in this example from the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, perhaps show he had sponsored a spectacle.

On the day of a gladiatorial spectacle, the events began with an impressive parade of fighters and their attendants. Leading the procession was the man who paid for it all—the sponsor, or *editor*. Seated in the front row, visible to everyone in the amphitheater, he was the center of attention and applause. Whether the emperor or a local dignitary, paying for the games was a form of conspicuous consumption, a combination of generosity and boastfulness.

If you believed the few surviving letters and essays, you might get the impression that elite Romans turned their noses up at the games. The archaeological record tells us otherwise, of course: The widespread popularity of the games and evidence of hundreds of arenas across the Roman Empire suggest that plenty of the rich citizens were willing to spend big to curry favor with voters and burnish their reputations.

To keep wowing crowds, sponsors with political ambition tried to outdo each other by ordering ever more exotic animals to slaughter or equipping fighters with gilded armor and silver-plated weapons. “People are constantly running for election, and it’s complete craziness,” says archaeologist Martin Steskal of the Austrian Archaeological Institute. “Once you became a consul, you were bankrupt,” he adds, since politicians had to stage regular games to keep the public on their side and outdo their rivals.

Sponsors, wanting to be remembered, often commemorated their games in carvings and even commissioned mosaics at home so that guests would be reminded of a particularly exciting spectacle. Some even had gladiators and animal hunts carved on their tombs to remind people of their generosity from beyond the grave.

Footing the bill allowed the editor to choose between life and death. Sponsors typically granted a losing gladiator who fought well *missio*, or mercy. Or they could decide to order their death. That cost extra: A dead gladiator was far more expensive than one who walked out of the arena alive, a reflection of the investment in the training, housing, and medical and nutritional care of each fighter.

Eventually, the spiraling costs of sponsorship prompted emperors to step in. Beginning with Augustus (r. 27 B.C.–A.D. 14), several emperors set limits on what nobles could spend, hoping to control costs and reserve the glory of the most impressive games for themselves.

Roman coins bearing the bust of Commodus, the emperor most identified with gladiators





Grandest stage

The Colosseum, or the Flavian Amphitheater, in Rome, was the largest gladiatorial arena in the empire. Many of the smaller amphitheaters in the region were built in settlements of legionary veterans, or *coloniae*.

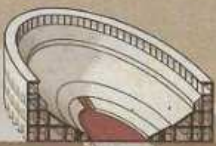


Roman highways

Consummate roadbuilders, Romans designed extensive thoroughfares, primarily for troop movement and trade. Gladiators used them to travel from city to city to perform.



Built into natural slope of terrain



Freestanding



Built more than 2,000 years ago, the amphitheater of Pompeii is one of the oldest in the Roman world. It was buried by a volcanic eruption in A.D. 79.



"The purpose is to give people a show," he says. "You can't be forced to fight well. If you want them to do it well, you have to have volunteers."

The contradiction the gladiators represented—people of lower status and possibly enslaved, yet

Watching gladiators offered rulebound Romans a thrill of the forbidden.

popular performers—may have contributed to the adulation from fans: Watching and getting up close to them offered rulebound Romans a thrill of the forbidden. "They were like sexy rock stars," says art historian Katherine Welch. Roman writers rolled their eyes at wealthy women who swooned over gladiators, but the attraction seems to have been more or less universal. Take Celadus the Thracian—a promising newcomer to Pompeii with three wins under his helmet who was "the sigh of the girls" according to an admiring graffito—or his trident-wielding compatriot Crescens, "netter of girls by night."

On a sunny spring afternoon, I had no trouble imagining the sights and sounds of sparring and warm-up bouts within earshot of the nearby theater. It's safe to assume that even the practice sessions at the barracks were a favorite attraction for fans: Because expensive arena spectacles only took place a few times each year, locals probably gravitated to the practice arena to watch well-muscled gladiators run through their moves each day.

Inscriptions found at Pompeii suggest gladiator troupes traveled from town to town, often followed by loyal fans, as part of a sword-wielding road show. Schools were run by a trainer and impresario called a *lanista*; gladiators spent most of their time training and fighting fellow members of the same troupe, or familia.

If a rich Roman wanted to sponsor a gladiator bout, he'd pay the lanista to rent his gladiators for the day. Large, wealthy cities might have a dedicated gladiator school to serve their amphitheater—Rome, the largest and wealthiest, had at least three.

Smaller towns might house a gladiator school that served the entertainment needs of a larger region—a sort of farm league for the provinces. Pompeii might be an example: One advertisement



An elaborate *murmillo* helmet, decorated with depictions of the Muses, was found in the ruins of Pompeii.

discovered just outside the city walls encouraged locals to head to Nola, a 20-mile (32 km) hike due north, to catch 20 pairs of gladiators facing off over the course of three days. Extra amenities, like awnings to provide shade for spectators, were also prominently mentioned.

EVEN AFTER THREE CENTURIES of excavations, archaeologists continue to uncover fresh evidence at Pompeii. In 2019, archaeologists working on the wall of a small tavern in a narrow alley on the north side of town uncovered a fresco of two gladiators. Both fighters have what look like ostrich plumes adorning

Near Pompeii's theater, an open space was repurposed as a gladiator barracks and training facility.





In 2019, archaeologists unearthed a fresco depicting two gladiators on the wall of what may have been a tavern or brothel. One is raising a finger in a gesture of surrender.

their bronze helmets and what Genot says includes unprecedented detail: One of the fighters wears pants under his leg protectors, a never-before-seen clue to how some gladiators dressed for battle. And after my close escape in Arles, I'm pleased to learn that cords hanging below his chin—seen for the first time in this fresco—may represent straps used to keep a heavy helmet firmly in place.

Bloody wounds on the bodies of both men show the fight has taken a toll. But there is a clear loser: One of the fighters, who is bleeding from a gash on his exposed chest and seems to be doubled over in pain, drops his shield and raises his forefinger. The gesture, repeated in many gladiator depictions, is the ancient equivalent of “tapping out” of a fight.

Other artwork, inscriptions, and literature from around the Roman world suggest that a colorful cast

of helpers and hangers-on waited in the wings, or even shared the arena floor. Helmets and weapons were carried into the ring during a prefight parade led by the *editor*, or sponsor of the games. Musicians warmed up the crowd as the gladiators took their places, and perhaps added dramatic flourishes during the fights. Fancier amphitheaters serving wealthier towns featured sailcloth awnings to provide shade. At the most lavish games, sponsors provided free food and cooling mists of scented water to refresh fans. Some games even included wooden balls redeemable for prizes that were tossed out into the crowd between fights—the ancient equivalent of T-shirt cannons, except lucky winners might walk away with money, an apartment, or a horse.

A key figure was the referee, whose role resembled that of a boxing referee and emcee rolled into one.



A Roman-era ceramic pot is decorated with a scene from the arena. At left, an assistant runs in with a replacement sword.

Holding a long staff as a symbol of authority, he was responsible for enforcing a strict sense of fair play in the ring. In one depiction, captured on a small pot found in the Netherlands, the referee holds up his staff to halt the fight as an assistant runs in from the wings with a replacement sword.

It's an important clue that belies the "anything goes" mythos that Hollywood movies promote. "You don't lose the fight because you lose your weapon," Genot says. "When you imagine gladiator fights as a sporting event, you cannot imagine there are no rules." Indeed, gladiators were trained to use specific combinations of armor and weaponry—a net and trident, for example, or heavy shield and short sword—and were closely identified by their fighting styles in life and even on their tombstones (see pages 60–61).

Most important, inscriptions promising "fights without reprieve"—in other words, to the death—and "fights with sharp weapons" suggest life-threatening clashes were unusual enough to be worthy of special mention.

And like any good sporting event, there were stats aplenty for fans to obsess over. Across the Roman world, gladiator wins, losses, and draws appear scratched on walls and chiseled onto tombstones. "It's highly likely that fans followed the progress of their favorite gladiators," says Harvard University classicist Kathleen Coleman. "People were keeping absolute tabs on who won which fights, who they defeated, and how many fights they had in their record."

The results of many matchups will never be known. But imagine the knot in the stomach of Valerius—whom a scratched graffito at Pompeii reports sur-



vived 25 combats—as he faced off against Viriotas, a veteran of 150.

Gladiators were more than mere entertainment. Literary accounts make it clear that by fighting—and sometimes bravely dying—gladiators reinforced Roman concepts of manliness and virtue. (Except, that is, for the net-wielding retiarius, whose tricky tactics and long-distance trident attacks made him the arena's designated baddie.) “Gladiators, whether ruined men or barbarians, what wounds they endure!” the Roman orator Cicero wrote around 50 B.C., at a time when criminals or prisoners of war still contested gladiator fights. “When condemned men fought with swords, there could be no sturdier training for the eye against pain and death.”

Pompeii also preserves another dark aspect of the games. Gladiator games may have provided an outlet

for Roman society's violent impulses, but they could also provide a spark. In A.D. 59, out-of-town fans from nearby Nuceria arrived in Pompeii to enjoy an “away” match. The historian Tacitus records what happened next: “They began with abusive language of each other, then they took up stones and at last weapons,” he writes. “And so there were brought to Rome a number of the people of Nuceria, with their bodies mutilated by wounds, and many lamented the deaths of children or of parents.” When word of the rioting reached Rome, the emperor Nero imposed a painfully specific punishment: Gladiator games in Pompeii were banned for a decade.

EVEN AS THEY WERE adored by many fans, gladiators ranked at the bottom of ancient Rome's rigidly hierarchical society, along with prostitutes, pimps,

The first gladiators may have been prisoners of war or criminals. By the time this scene was carved in the early third century A.D., most were volunteers.



and actors. By law, gladiators were considered property, not people. Whether enslaved or freeborn, they could be killed at the whim of the editor, who paid for their fight. “The sharpest division in Roman society, which was very stratified, was between slave and free. It’s key to everything,” says Coleman. “That’s fundamental to understanding how the Romans could sit in the stands and watch this happening.”

and your wife and your kids and go back to your life.”

Indeed, tombstones—often commissioned by fellow fighters or loved ones left behind—suggest many gladiators were family men. “Pompeius the retiarius, winner of nine crowns, born in Vienna, 25 years of age,” reads one such monument excavated in France. “His wife put this up with her own money for her wonderful spouse.”

There was even a gladiator oath, underscoring the nature of life in the arena.

In the early days of gladiator fights—likely staged as part of prehistoric funeral rituals as early as 300 B.C.—the combatants probably were prisoners of war or condemned criminals. But as the games became a central feature of life across the empire in the first century B.C., they became more organized, and audience expectations rose. Dozens of gladiator schools popped up to meet the audience demand for well-trained volunteer fighters.

Because Roman citizens couldn’t be executed without a trial, some aspiring freeborn fighters signed away their rights and became enslaved as a high-risk way to pay off debts or escape a life of poverty. These new gladiators willingly pledged the gladiator oath, which underscored the nature of their new life in the arena. Others were criminals sentenced to serve as gladiators—a lighter punishment than execution, because there was a chance of being set free someday.

And despite their lowly status, successful gladiators could earn a lot of money. Some may have even moonlighted as bodyguards for rich patrons. “Do your time,” says French historian Meryl Ducros, “and when it’s over you can take your money

Such memorials also are evidence that gladiators were proud of their work. Grave markers often included their records in the ring and depictions of weapons and armor, the tools of their trade. “It’s just the same as being a baker or shoemaker—you say what you did, and you’re proud of it,” Coleman says. “It doesn’t sound like they’re treated like criminals. Gladiators saw themselves as professionals.”

PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS needed professional training. A discovery made in 2016 at an ancient Roman site in Austria known as Carnuntum shows where they got it.

On a blustery early spring day, Eduard Pollhammer, the scientific director of Carnuntum, leads me out into the middle of a freshly sown farm field on the banks of the Danube, 25 miles (40 km) east of Vienna. The heavy gray clouds begin to spit cold rain, reminding me just how far we are from the sun-soaked ruins of Pompeii and Arles.

In the winter, temperatures here plunge well below freezing, and the wheat fields

A fragmented cup from Roman-era London shows a gladiator fight.



are covered with snow. But even here, on what was the edge of the empire, the Roman appetite for gladiator spectacles was such that Carnuntum boasted two amphitheaters: one for its thousands of active-

Researchers found the outlines of a whole neighborhood built to serve gladiator fans.

duty soldiers and another to entertain civilians living in the bustling town next door.

Around A.D. 200, the rolling hills here were home to one of the Roman frontier's biggest military bases, Pollhammer explains. More than 7,000 troops stationed here patrolled the empire's northern frontier. Carnuntum is so big, more than 150 years of excavations have uncovered only 15 percent of its four-square-mile (10 km²) area.

In the early 2000s, concerned that intensive plowing would destroy undiscovered parts of the site, archaeologists turned to ground-penetrating radar to try to map the buried remains of buildings. Between the town walls and the municipal amphitheater's earthen foundations, researchers found the outlines of a whole neighborhood built to serve fans, including taverns, souvenir shops, even a bakery where spectators could grab a bite before taking their seats.

In 2010, archaeologists reported something special: a gladiator barracks, or *ludus*, a short walk from the crumbling earthen ruins of Carnuntum's amphitheater. From Roman accounts, Pollhammer says, we know there must have been dozens like it across

the empire. The training facilities were bankrolled by emperors and local dignitaries and often run by trainer-impresarios called *lanistae*, many of whom were themselves former gladiators.

In Rome, there was a gladiator training complex in the shadow of the Colosseum with at least four facilities in the city center, one with a tunnel leading



directly into the lower levels of the Colosseum—along with a medical facility, warehouses for sets and props, and a rehab center for wounded fighters. “An enormous tract of downtown Rome was devoted to gladiator schools,” Welch says. “It’s all prime real estate.”

But the dirt under our feet hides the first complete example ever found. Without lifting a shovel,

researchers identified via radar a great hall with a raised floor that could have been heated with warm air from below. It may have been used as a training gym in the cold Austrian winters. Along the edge of an open yard is an L-shaped building with rooms or cells. Thick walls were a sign that parts of the facility had two stories. There were even baths,



At the Roman military town of Carnuntum in modern-day Austria, there were two amphitheaters—one for Roman soldiers and one for civilians (shown here).

ASSEMBLY HALL

This large room may have served as a multipurpose gathering space with long tables and chairs.

BATH COMPLEX

Four interconnected rooms made up the bath complex, which helped gladiators recover from their rigorous training.

Apodyterium
(changing room)

Tepidarium
(warm room)

Frigidarium
(cold bath)

Caldarium
(hot bath)

A hypocaust—the Roman system for under-floor heating—would have allowed training to continue in the winter months.

Storage room

Furnace to heat water and rooms

Additional training arena

The main gate controlled access into the school.

TRAINING ARENA

Viewing stands enclosed an arena where instruction and practice could be seen by a fighter's owner and potential investors.

LIVING QUARTERS

Two wings of the school held rooms of varying size and ornamentation that housed up to 75 gladiators and trainers.



ADMINISTRATION

The owner, or *lanista*, lived and worked in the buildings at the school's entrance. He had the power of life and death over the gladiators, who had no rights under Roman law.

FIGHT SCHOOL

Across the empire, schools known as *ludi* trained prisoners of war, criminals, volunteers, and enslaved people to be professional gladiators. A recently discovered *ludus* at Carnuntum, a Roman city and military base in eastern Austria, reveals how gladiators lived and trained.

with water pipes, basins, and hot and cold pools. At the center of it all was a circular training arena 62 feet (19 m) across. Standing on the narrow walkway overlooking the arena, Pollhammer gestures at the empty, wind-whipped wheat field all around us. "We think about 70 or 75 gladiators lived here," Pollhammer says. "There was a whole infrastructure for big spectacles."

WHAT DROVE THE ROMANS to devote such resources to gladiators? What kept fans coming back, year after year, for nearly six centuries? Recent excavations at the Colosseum in Rome offer clues. Under the floor of the arena, there's a vast underground space extending about 20 feet (6 m) below ground level. Today visitors can tour part of the labyrinth of columns, crumbled brick staircases, and shadowy chambers.

During a major restoration effort that began in 2000, German Archaeological Institute researcher Heinz-Jürgen Beste spent four years carefully documenting the stonework underneath the arena. He revealed traces of an ingenious wooden system of platforms, elevators, winches, and ramps, manned by hundreds of stage technicians and animal handlers.

Through dozens of trapdoors in the arena floor, handlers could release animals directly into the middle of the ring for staged hunts, called *venationes*, that typically served as the appetizer for gladiator combats. Recent excavations revealed the remains of fearsome creatures from all over the Roman empire: Bear skulls, wolf and lion bones, and the remains of boar, deer, and ostrich testify to the exotic animals slaughtered in the arena.

Other trapdoors and machinery allowed stagehands to send elaborately painted sets 30 feet (9 m) high—perhaps re-creating a jungle or forest, or scenes from mythology—vaulting straight out of the arena floor. Elevators might have popped gladiators themselves directly into the ring. "Spectators didn't know what would open when, or where," Beste says.

The system, replicated on a smaller scale at dozens of provincial amphitheaters across the empire, epitomized the draw of the games. Scholars say the idea that bloodlust was behind the Roman passion for gladiator games is a misunderstanding. "Death was so ordinary. That wasn't the point," Welch says. From animal hunts to gladiator fights, everything about the events was calculated to keep fans on the edge of their stone seats. Suspense, not brutality, was the lifeblood of the spectacle.

To ensure exciting contests, fighting styles were carefully balanced. A nimble, near-naked fighter known as a *retiarius* and armed with only a net, trident, and small knife might face off against a lumbering *murmillio* warrior wearing over 45 pounds (20 kg) of protective gear. The rare appearance of

sword-wielding women, recorded in historical accounts and a handful of surviving stone carvings, would have been a thrill for Romans who thought women belonged at home.

Meanwhile, experienced gladiators were matched with other veterans, leaving new recruits to fight one another. The longer your career, the better your chances of survival, as each experienced gladiator represented years of investment. "There are hours and man-years going through all the fencing moves, building up the musculature, training for speed, strength, and endurance," says archaeologist Jon Coulston. "Like modern football, it becomes a hugely capital-intensive enterprise."

Renting gladiators was a "you break it, you buy it" arrangement. If a fighter was killed, whether or not

Romans loved a well-balanced fight: Would the lightly protected *retiarius* (right) overcome the heavily armored *secutor*?



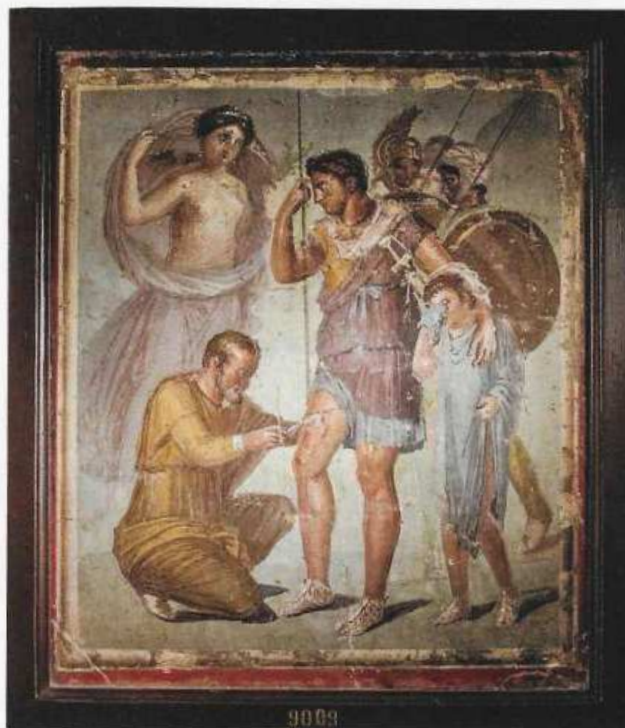
intentionally, the sponsor paid full price. “These people were so valuable because they were so highly trained. You don’t want to squander that,” says NYU’s Welch. “Out of 10 pairs, there would be one death, possibly two.”

As amphitheaters proliferated across the empire and political hopefuls spent lavishly on spectacles, the costs of gladiatorial games spiraled out of control. By the second century A.D., the pressure to put on ever more impressive events made the games prohibitively expensive, threatening their very existence. A massive bronze tablet discovered more than a century ago in the ruins of Italica, a Roman town on the outskirts of modern-day Seville, Spain, reveals how Romans tried to get things back under control.

Known as the *Tabula Gladiatoria*, it’s inscribed with a decree issued in A.D. 177 that limited what sponsors could spend on games. It even includes a detailed table of fees. Renting a gladiator “of the highest and best-looking grade” could cost up to 15,000 sesterces, more than enough to pay the wages of a typical Roman soldier. Up to a quarter of that sum went to the gladiator—and was payable in advance.

EVEN THOUGH GLADIATORS got the best medical care available, and death was uncommon, it was still an ever present risk, either in the ring or as a result of infections afterward. Audiences appreciated and rewarded the extra expense a dead gladiator represented. In the *Satyricon*, a work of fiction from the first century A.D., Roman author Petronius describes a particularly expensive show thrown by a young noble who had recently inherited a fortune. A staggering 400,000 sesterces bought him “the best steel, no running away, with the butchery done in the middle so the whole amphitheater can see.”

It’s easy to dismiss such sentiments as a thing of the distant past, and Romans as fundamentally different from us. But that would be letting ourselves off the hook too easily. When it comes to a taste for violent spectacle, we’re closer to the Romans than we



Ancient medics—here, a doctor removes an arrowhead from an injured hero—often learned their trade at gladiator schools.

like to imagine. The most popular sport in the United States is football, which regularly leaves players too seriously injured to walk off the field.

Meanwhile, athletes who engage in violent sports—from football to boxing to mixed martial arts—are idolized as exemplars of discipline, toughness, and grit. Their bouts attract millions of spectators, even as the long-lasting damage that violent contact sports does to athletes has become widely known.

“Life isn’t candy land and puppies. Life is hard. We need to yell, to cry, to scream about something,” Ducros says. “We need to see a little bit of violence to externalize the violence we feel inside. We can’t judge the Romans for organizing that.”

THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN casts long shadows, dividing the Arles amphitheater into light and dark. Another group of tourists has taken its place on the centuries-old stone seats, watching a net-wielding retiarius play cat and mouse with his

heavily armored opponent. The crack of trident on shield and scrape of heavy net on the ground fill the arena with an ancient rhythm. The fighters' breathing grows labored and loud as sand and dust billow up from the arena floor.

Built in A.D. 90, the 20,000-seat venue is one of the best preserved amphitheaters in the world. Millions may visit the Colosseum in Rome each year, but most ancient Romans would have experienced

a characteristic J-shaped sword, and a *murmillo*, with a long, heavy shield and straight bladed sword—emerge from the tunnel and take their places on the hot sand. It's an opportunity for Lopez to give me a crash course in gladiator connoisseurship.

First lesson: Forget the dramatic gestures familiar from the movies. Their swords aren't swung from the shoulder, they jab and dart from behind their shields. "After 25 years, we can see the movements are not

"Gladiators know they're taking a risk, but their punch is not a full punch."

gladiator games in smaller, intimate spaces just like this. Pompeii, Pozzuoli, Arles, Nola, Ephesos, Carnuntum—"they all had their scrubby little amphitheater," Coleman says.

Standing on the edge of the arena, I think of how these minor-league arenas must have sounded and smelled as gladiators took the ring: the electric din of 20,000 screaming, sweaty fans, the sand reeking of animal blood from the morning's hunts, trumpets blaring and drums pounding. I quickly begin to feel claustrophobic, and the ancient arena is practically empty—imagine how the gladiators must have felt, trapped behind their heavy helmets.

For ACTA Sarl's Lopez, the arena is a second home. His gladiator troupe performs here regularly, presenting the results of their research in physical form for summer crowds of kids and curious adults. In between matches, they recover in the cool stone tunnel leading into the ring, surrounded by the smell of horses and sweat.

Standing in the shade at the side of the ring, Lopez calls to mind a grizzled *lanista*, a former fighter freed from the arena but unable to escape its pull. He nods as two more of his protégés—a Thracian, with

very efficient to kill someone," he says as the men in the ring advance on each other with a shuddering crash of shields. "Little knife, big armor? It's impossible to have big, showy movements."

Second lesson: Watch the back. With their arms and legs protected by armor, their heads covered by heavy, impenetrable helmets, and their chests often hidden by heavy, chin-to-shin wood-and-leather shields, it's often the only exposed skin on either fighter. Slashing cuts over the shoulder would have left trails of blood visible from the stands but spared vital organs. "The crowd needs to see blood to see the touch," Lopez says, eyes now fixed on the frantic action in the center of the ring. "The goal is not to kill but to injure and cut. Gladiators know they're taking a risk, but their punch is not a full punch."

Third lesson: Don't look away. Almost faster than I can follow, the Thracian sidesteps a charge and slips his hooked sword past his opponent's shield. Twisting nimbly, he delivers a light touch between his opponent's shoulder blades. The referee lifts his staff and gives a shout.

For today, the fights are over.



A reenactor catches a breath between fights in the Roman-era amphitheater of Arles, France. Gladiators risked their lives in the ring—but research suggests they rarely lost them.



As they might have in ancient times, posters and ads for upcoming gladiator spectacles decorate the walls of Arles, France.



CHAPTER II

The Making of a Gladiator

Gladiator spectacles weren't free-for-alls. Instead, they evolved to be highly regimented and systematized performances executed by expertly trained athletes, choreographed to create maximum suspense for audiences.





From swords to spears and tridents, gladiators fought with a range of weapons—and usually specialized in one fighting style, known as an *armatura*.

G

GLADIATORS SPECIALIZED in one type of fighting, known as their *armatura*. The fighters were paired off by type in the arena to match strengths with weaknesses for evenly matched yet extremely entertaining bouts. The heavily armored *murmillio* met the nimble, net-wielding *retiarius*, or faced the *thraex* with his distinctive crested bronze helmet and curved sword.

Each type had its dedicated fans. Fighters who could switch back and forth between two fighting styles were remarkable enough that this skill is sometimes mentioned on their tombstones.

Surviving evidence suggests that training, too, was tailored to each gladiator type. Specialized coaches called *doctores*, some probably former gladiators, drilled trainees on how to use their weapons to best effect in the ring.

There are hints that the gladiators even organized themselves by fighting style, bunking and eating

with other fighters trained in the same style. Because they were usually paired with different types, this might have given them a professional distance within the gladiator school, or *ludus*, and simultaneously helped cultivate team spirit.

IN TRAINING

Millions of tourists flock to the Colosseum at the center of Rome each year. But to understand the centrality of the games to Roman life, an easily over-

Scholars have found evidence for dozens of similar schools across the Roman Empire, devoted to training, housing, and feeding gladiators. Although an amphitheater might only have been in operation a few weeks a year, gladiators trained year-round, honing their skills ahead of time the way boxers prepare for fights by sparring and working out for months leading up to a main event.

The spectator area at the Ludus Magnus suggests workouts might have been an attraction on their

Gladiators trained year-round, honing their skills ahead of a main event.

looked excavation site on a side street nearby, across from a pharmacy and a pizzeria, is perhaps more revealing—and no tickets are needed to peek over the fence.

Visible just below street level are the foundations of another full-size arena, surrounded by a narrow gallery where a few spectators might have stood. Crumbling brick structures nearby once housed fighters in small rooms.

Called the Ludus Magnus, the facility was at the heart of one of four gladiator schools surrounding the Colosseum. Nearby were massive warehouses for equipment and props, a hospital, and even a rehab center for fighters recovering from wounds sustained in the Colosseum.

Gladiators training inside or living in the cells that surrounded the Ludus Magnus practice arena literally lived in the shadow of the big show, and ancient sources describe a tunnel that led directly from the school to the arena. “The real estate is prime,” says NYU historian Katherine Welch. “An enormous tract of downtown Rome was devoted to gladiator schools.”

own. Gamblers looking to check out fighters in person or fans eager to watch the rippling, bulging muscles of their favorite gladiators might have even paid to watch training sessions.

Gladiator barracks were expensive to run, and many belonged to the emperor or rich Romans. Managed by impresarios called *lanistae*, typically ex-gladiators who had won their freedom in combat, the barracks employed a range of specialists. Staff included doctors charged with giving fighters the best medical care, *unctores*, or “ointment men,” responsible for oiling and massaging gladiators after workouts, and a complement of cooks, armorers, and other staff.

Additionally, there was a strict internal pecking order. New arrivals were at the very bottom. Next came *tiros*, who had received basic training but hadn’t yet faced real combat. Once a gladiator survived his first fight, he was dubbed a *veteranus*. Top-ranked gladiators were known as “first posters,” after the wooden pole that served as a sort of punching bag for swordsmanship training.

Alongside the strict order was a sense of close-knit community, so much so that a troupe of gladiators



The Ludus Magnus, in the shadow of Rome's Colosseum, was a combination barracks and gym for gladiators in training.

BLOOD SPORT OF

The Roman elite staged gladiatorial games both to display the

WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

Roman soldiers and gladiators fought to win and survive, but the battles they fought had different purposes. Their equipment reflected that.



Gladiator
15-45 lb



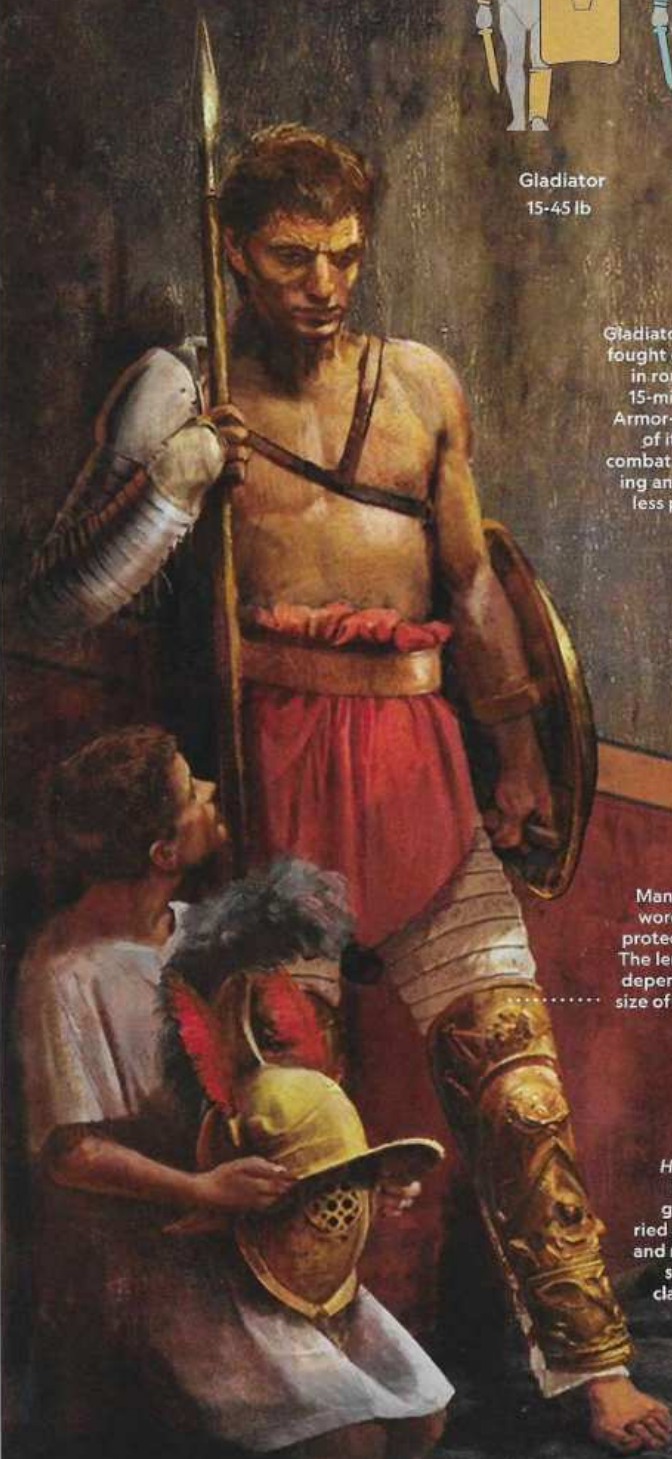
Roman
legionary
55 lb

Gladiators typically fought one-on-one in roughly 10- to 15-minute bouts. Armor—or the lack of it—made the combat more thrilling and outcomes less predictable.

Many gladiators wore greaves to protect their legs. The length varied, depending on the size of their shield.

Hoplomachus

This type of gladiator carried a long spear and round shield similar to the classical Greek infantry's.



THE ANCIENTS

empire's dominance and to vie for power and influence.



Roman
legionary
4.5 lb

.04 in Thickness

Soldiers and gladiators were richly decorated helmets, but the gladiators' provided more protection for the face, making them heavier and limiting vision and hearing.



Face guard

Murmillio
9 lb

.08 in

Armguards made of textiles often were covered with metal plates or scales for added protection.

Thraex



MURMILLO



THRAEX



SECUTOR

was called a *familia*. Tombstones show fallen family members were mourned: Many monuments were paid for by surviving members of the gladiator school to commemorate fallen comrades. “There’s a big sense of community among gladiators,” says French historian Meryl Ducros, who works for the gladiator research and reenactment group called ACTA Sarl. “They were really close friends. The community of gladiators pays for the fallen. It’s important to know they are families.”

THE PLAYERS

Gladiator games featured a familiar lineup and had their legion of dedicated fans. Here are six of the common gladiator types:

- **MURMILLO:** The tank of the arena, this gladiator carried a shin-to-shoulder shield, wore a heavy, full-coverage helmet topped with a tall crest, and donned arm and leg guards into the arena. He was armed with a short sword, called a *gladius*, based on the standard weapon of Roman legionaries.

Slow-moving and well protected behind his heavy shield, the murmilllo was typically paired against faster-moving opponents. The name comes from a type of fish, perhaps because of the upswept, finlike crest on his helmet.

- **THRAEX:** One of the most popular gladiator types, the thraex was named after the Thracian people who lived around modern-day Bulgaria. (Featuring gladiators dressed like them in the arena was a way to celebrate Roman conquests.) The thraex was easily recognized by his J-shaped sword and small, curved shield. His armor was limited to leg and arm protectors, forcing him to rely on speed and agility to triumph in combat.

- **SECUTOR:** Wearing an armguard and carrying just a shield and sword resembling those Roman legionary soldiers used, the secutor, meaning pursuer, was mobile enough to chase his usual opponent, the net-wielding retiarius, around the ring. The secutor’s helmet was smooth and egg-shaped to prevent it



RETIARIUS



HOPLOMACHUS

from getting caught on a retiarius's net. With just two eyeholes, the helmet must have been hard to see or breathe through, a handicap that balanced out bouts with this gladiator's bareheaded foe.

- **RETIARIUS:** Named for the Roman word for net (*rete*), the “net man” was an arena staple and the secutor's usual foil. He carried a trident, short knife, and weighted net, but no helmet or shield. Using the net to trip his opponent, he would then close in for the kill. Because he relied on attacks from a distance and fast footwork, the retiarius was often described in ancient accounts as unmanly—Romans respected fighters who stood their ground. They may have been crowd favorites nonetheless, in much the same way the crowd loves to cheer the “bad guy” in a professional wrestling match.

- **HOPLOMACHUS:** With a spear and small shield, the hoplomachus—from the Greek for “armored fighter”—was intended to recall typical Greek warriors. They wore leg armor that extended high up

their thighs and helmets decorated with tall feather plumes. The hoplomachus usually paired off with the *murmillio* or *thraex*.

- **EQUES:** Mounted warriors who entered the arena riding white horses and carrying spears, eques gladiators finished their fights on foot. Whether or not on horseback, they're easily recognized in carvings and mosaics by the two feathers on either side of their bowler hat-shaped helmets. They were often pitted against one another.

Despite these fan favorites, crowds always loved a surprise, and literary sources and tombstones include references to a variety of more exotic gladiator types deployed to add a splash of excitement to the familiar lineup. Some included the *essedarius*, who thundered into the ring in a horse-drawn chariot; the *scissor*, who wielded a curved, half-moon-shaped knife perfect for cutting the retiarius's net; and the *laquearius*, equipped with a long lasso to snare his foe before finishing him off with a knife.

CENTURIES OF SPECTACLE

ROMAN FORUM, mid to late first century B.C.

During the Republican era, most contests took place in wooden structures temporarily erected in the Roman Forum, the city's civic center. Combatants often were outfitted to evoke the empire's enemies.



American football field



10,000 spectators

Temple of Castor and Pollux

Basilica Julia

Fighters bearing weapons and armor of various weights met in the ring.



Provocator 31-33 lb equipment weight

Unlike other types of gladiators, provocatores—or "challengers"—wore metal breastplates and usually fought members of their own category.

Shields were used in defense and as weapons.

Referees, sometimes working in pairs, used rods to enforce rules, which remain unknown.

Originally part of elite funerals, gladiatorial contests grew into extravagant events. Arenas and amphitheaters became integral to social and political life, with gladiators at center stages employing distinct fighting styles and weapons to maximize the spectacle.

POMPEII, first century A.D.

As the games' popularity grew, stone amphitheaters like this one in Pompeii were built across the empire. Gladiators became more specialized, their gear more elaborate, and their training more structured.



22,000
spectators

During gladiatorial games, only one pair would fight at a time.

The *velarium*, or extendable awning, provided shade.

The *gladius*, a Roman infantry sword, was used to thrust at opponents.

Murmillo 35-40 lb

This type of gladiator, perhaps named for a fish that decorated his helmet, fought gladiators such as the *thraex* (right) and the *hoplomachus*.

Thraex 35-40 lb

Armed with a short shield and a curved sword called a *sica*, the gladiators modeled on Thracian warriors were known to be especially swift.

Musicians played during the opening procession, as well as during the games.

COLOSSEUM, second century A.D.

The contests reached their peak—in cost, size, and scope—after the construction of the Colosseum, a monumental architectural feat that set the standard for future Roman amphitheaters.

Equipment weight



Light



Medium



Heavy



Sometimes one retiarius would take on two *secutores*. A platform with stones to hurl evened the odds.

A gladiator indicated surrender by extending an index finger.

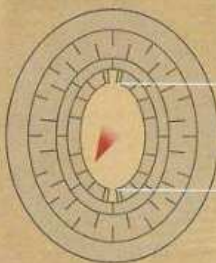
A *galerus*, or shoulder guard, gave partial protection to the head and neck.

Secutor 35-40 lb

The *secutor* donned a smooth helmet with small eyeholes to protect against the *retiarius*'s trident and avoid being ensnared in his net.

Retiarius 15-18 lb

Quick and nimble, the *retiarius* fought with a trident, weighted net, and dagger. His only defense was an arm and shoulder guard.



87 yd

50,000+
spectators

Women,
slaves, and
foreigners

Roman
citizens

Roman
citizens

Records of gladiatri-
ces are limited; only
one image of their
combat survives.

Other
elites

Senators
and vestal
priestesses

lets more than
six feet tall pro-
tected spectators
from the action
in the arena.

Gladiatrix 35-40 lb

Though the vast majority of gladiators were men, particularly lavish games might have featured a rare bout with female combatants.

Eques 22-26 lb

These horsemen began their bouts on horseback with a spear, then dismounted to finish the fight on foot with a sword.



Fights were a feast for the senses: Musicians accompanied the combat to keep the audience engaged.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Gladiator fights were, above all, entertainment. Gladiators were the stars, of course, but no show would be complete without supporting players. Though most historical depictions of gladiators focus on the fighters themselves, a tiny, little-known gemstone found in the collection of the Berlin State Museums offers a window into the sounds and sights of the arena. Scarcely bigger than a fingernail, the intricately carved stone shows a packed scene: Along with the fighters, it's possible to make out the sponsor of the event in the stands, musicians, and fans sitting in the seats above.

The games were certainly a visual spectacle. Artists and sign painters would have been employed to create eye-catching programs, posters, and placards to advertise the games ahead of time. During interludes in the action, signs served up backstories, colorful nicknames for gladiators, and drama for the crowd's consumption. Most gladiators wore helmets during com-

bat, so visual cues like decorations on their armor or colorful ostrich or peacock feathers would have helped distinguish one from another.

The arenas would have been loud, too. Inside and outside the ring, it's easy to imagine heralds, announcers, and emcees whipping up the crowd, similar to the prelude to boxing or wrestling matches today. Cheers, chants, and boos would reverberate off the stone walls of the arena, and the sponsors' generosity would be publicly praised; prayers might be offered up to the emperor and assorted gods.

Carvings and historical accounts show that action in the ring was accompanied by music, much like a pep band at a college basketball game. Horns and flutes, pipes and drums, and a Roman water organ provided a sound track for warm-ups, fights, and perhaps other pivotal moments.



Just like sports fans today, the Romans loved souvenirs—like this amber gladiator helmet, found in London.

"Musicians would have [accentuated] thrusts, parries, feints or standard sequences of moves with a tune," the historian Garrett Fagan wrote in his book *The Lure of the Arena*, "announcing with a trumpet blast when a blow had landed . . . or even playing a jingle at the granting of an appeal or a dirge on denial."

Besides the referee, a variety of helpers made the games run smoothly. Seamen and shipbuilders were employed to fashion and suspend huge cloth sails above the amphitheater to provide shade for spectators. Animal handlers and stagehands were busy behind the scenes deploying painted sets and moving caged beasts into place.

During the fight itself, the referee had assistants waiting in the wings to run out with replacement

weapons if a sword or trident broke, the ancient equivalent of ball- or batboys today. And accounts of some games suggest an executioner, masked and carrying a heavy hammer, was on hand to deliver death blows if the sponsor demanded it and neither fighter was capable at the end of a particularly bloody bout. If one fighter was still standing and the loser wasn't to be spared, the winner was expected to deliver the final sword cut, typically a swift stab down through the neck to the heart. "Killing gladiators is done quickly and cleanly," says Jon Coulston, an archaeologist at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "It's a professional courtesy between gladiators—if somebody is going to die, make it as painless as possible, and absolutely deadly."

FEMALE GLADIATORS

A carving found at Halicarnassus, in what is today Turkey, depicts two armed women in gladiator gear. Their stage names, Amazon and Achillia, are accompanied by the result of their fight: a draw. This carving corroborates a handful of ancient accounts of women fighting in the arena.

A few ancient authors made clear that women occasionally appeared in the arena, notable because it was so shocking and rare. Romans associated women with the home; women fighters, meanwhile, were connected with legendary, far-off tribes like the Amazons. "Whenever the audience of an amphitheatre saw a woman appearing in the arena with arms, and using them skillfully," writes University of Granada historian Alfonso Manas, "they regarded it as the epitome of exoticism and luxury." Women fighters were scandalous enough that the emperor Septimius Severus banned them in A.D. 200.



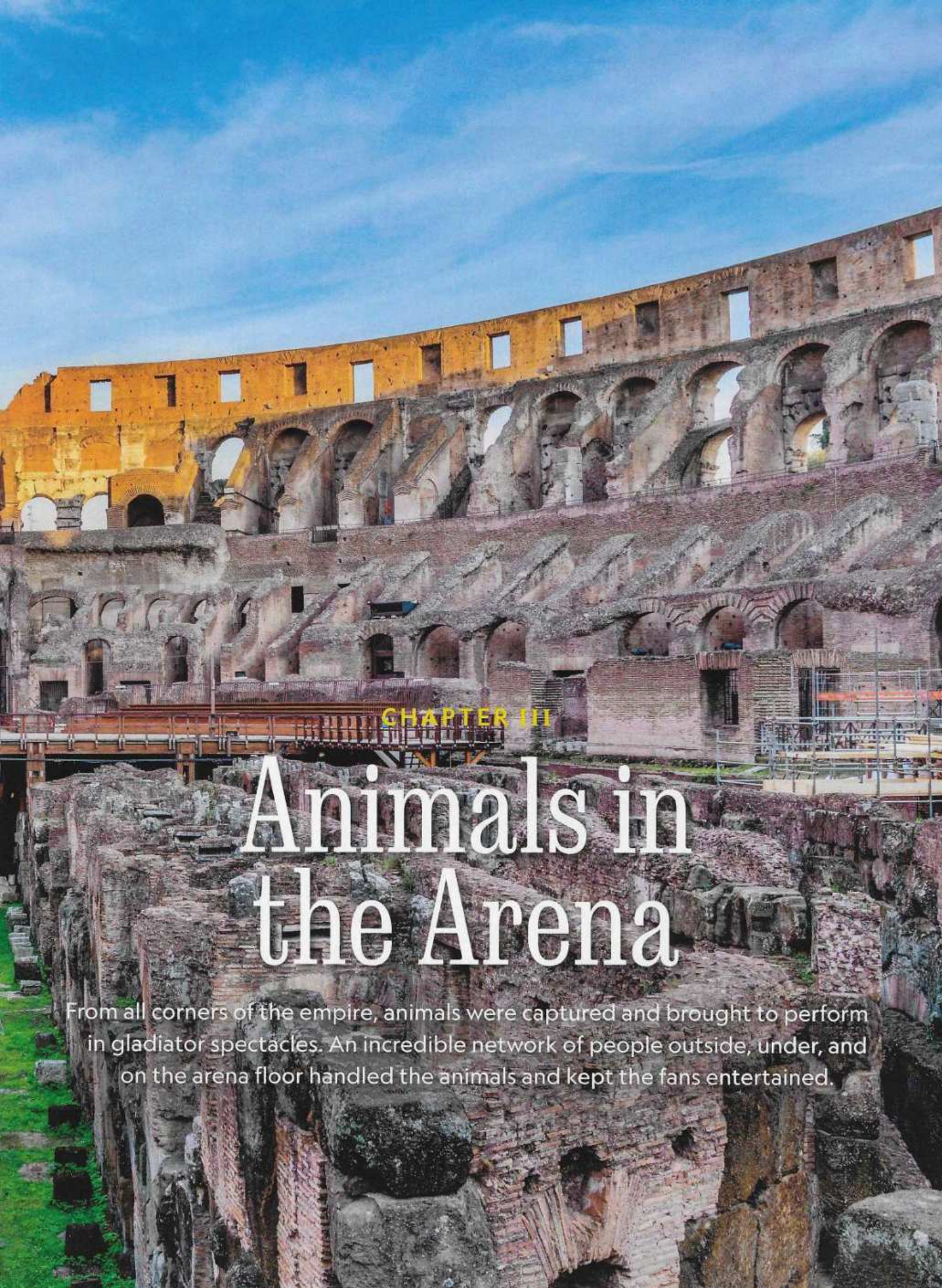
Not all experts agree that this 2,000-year-old statue is of a female gladiator, but female fighters did exist.

Although the carving of Achillia and Amazon confirms female gladiators competed in the arena, other evidence is more controversial. A little-known bronze statue at the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts depicts a woman naked from the waist up, raising what looks like a curved sword or dagger in her left hand and gazing down, as if at a defeated opponent. Her leg is wrapped in leather or fabric straps known as *fasciae*, typical gladiator gear. In a 2011 paper, Manas argued the statue represents a female gladiator—only the second known piece of visual evidence for women in the arena.

But others say the statue is more likely an athlete, holding aloft a strigil—a scraper Romans used to remove sweat, oil, and dirt. The lack of a helmet and armor suggests she wasn't a fighter: "No gladiator is depicted with so little protective clothing," says historian Kathleen Coleman.

A network of tunnels under the Roman Colosseum provided room for animal cages, trapdoors, and elevators used for beast fights.





CHAPTER III

Animals in the Arena

From all corners of the empire, animals were captured and brought to perform in gladiator spectacles. An incredible network of people outside, under, and on the arena floor handled the animals and kept the fans entertained.





G

GLADIATOR SPECTACLES were held several times a year and were often elaborate ways to celebrate military victories, funerals, or to drum up support for political campaigns. Making the events more entertaining and remarkable was the variety of performances that led up to the gladiatorial matchups. The most exotic events of all involved animals.

Called *venationes*, these staged animal “hunts” pitted specially trained beast fighters called *venatores* against a menagerie of deadly wild animals ranging from lions and leopards to bears and bulls. The events were staged all across the empire, wherever gladiator fights were found, and lasted for centuries after gladiator fights were banned.

A vast infrastructure was built to keep up with the demand for animals: from big gardens or zoos outside the city to keep them all until the morning of the big event, to a far-flung web of trappers, hunters,



Previous pages: Specialized fighters called *venatores* took on wild animals in the arena, warming up the crowd for the gladiator fights that followed. *Right:* An oil lamp shows a bear fighting a bull, another popular matchup.

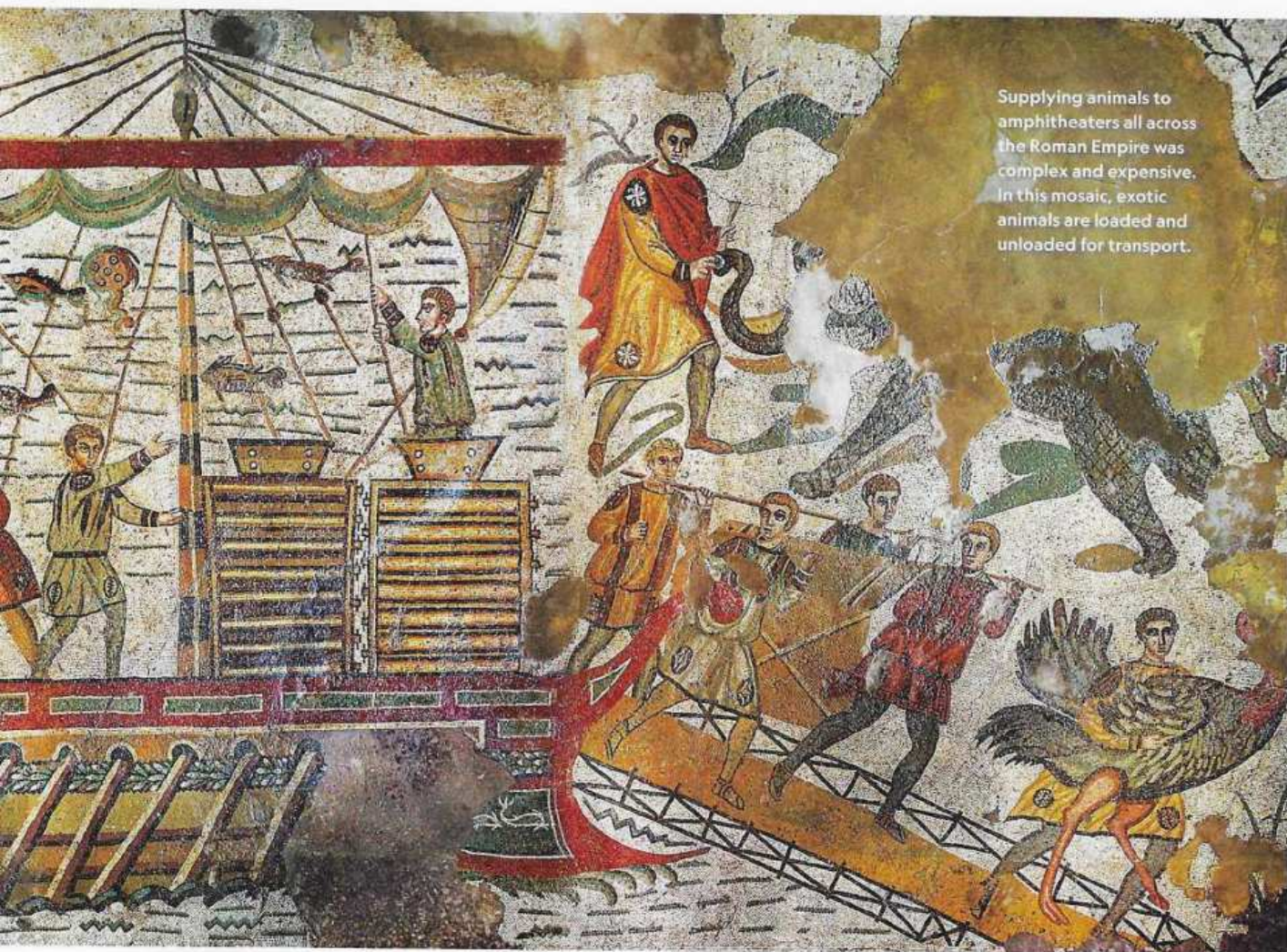
handlers, sailors, and likely even the ancient equivalent of veterinarians. Imagine the effort and resources it must have taken to transport an elephant or giraffe thousands of miles, over the course of months, to arrive safely in the arena.

The centrality of the games to Roman life meant the army—the Roman institution with manpower stationed at the farthest reaches of the empire—played a central role in animal capture and transport.



A mosaic found in modern-day Algeria depicts Roman soldiers corralling lions and leopards into a cage; a third-century Egyptian text, meanwhile, gives detailed instructions on catching lions in the wild.

Catching and caging a lion was no easy feat, but the next step might have been even more challenging: Keeping lions, elephants, hippos, or crocodiles alive, well fed, and in fighting trim on the months-long journey from the wilds of northern Africa to central Rome would have been a tremendous achievement given the technology available at the time—as well as extraordinarily



Supplying animals to amphitheaters all across the Roman Empire was complex and expensive. In this mosaic, exotic animals are loaded and unloaded for transport.

cruel to the animals, a concept the ancient Romans probably would have found foreign.

There were practical considerations, too. Sailing ships could only safely make the voyage across the Mediterranean in the calm summer months. For every lion or leopard that arrived intact after weeks or months on wagons and ships, it's safe to assume several more perished along the way.

And with hundreds of amphitheaters, big and small, all across the empire, the demand for animals would have been tremendous and constant. Sponsors and spectacle organizers sometimes put in orders for lions, panthers, and other creatures years in advance. Add in the usual unpredictability of travel

and transport in the ancient world and you get a precarious situation: If a shipment of animals failed to arrive in time for a spectacle or arrived too sick or weak to perform, it was humiliating for the sponsor of the games. One rich Roman, writing in the early fifth century, complained sadly to a friend that the 50 crocodiles he hoped to slaughter in a show instead refused to eat, got sick, and died before the big day.

Though they were almost inevitably slaughtered, the animals were usually the stars of the event. Venatores were considered lower status than their gladiator counterparts. Typically, they wore little or no protective gear and carried spears or bows, relying on their skill and training to best the beasts.

As with the gladiator fights, novelty and unpredictability were key to the appeal of venationes. Animals killed in interesting ways—the emperor Commodus reportedly shot the heads off ostriches using crescent-shaped arrows, for example—were always a hit, although most sponsors preferred to stay safely in the stands. The more unusual or hard to transport an animal was, the more the crowd appreciated the trouble and expense involved.

The spectacles weren't always hunts, either, although they almost always ended in death. Organizers also liked to pit animal against animal, staging

matchups that would never happen in nature to see which animal would win. "A lion versus a bear—how do you know what's going to happen?" asks historian Katherine Welch. "What Romans loved were uncertain outcomes."

The animal fights were tremendously costly in terms of both blood and money. In his autobiography, the Roman emperor Augustus boasted that he imported 3,500 African animals for slaughter in the arena over the course of his 40-year reign.

As the popularity and importance of the games grew in subsequent centuries, so did the demand

MAGERIUS MOSAIC

In 1966, construction workers stumbled upon a massive mosaic in the tiny Tunisian village of Smirat, not far from the Mediterranean coast. The floor panel, 22 feet (7 m) across and 17 feet (5 m) long, had once been part of a country estate, likely belonging to a rich Roman olive magnate named Magerius.

More than 1,700 years after it was installed, the mosaic provides us with a vivid picture—literally—of a long-ago animal hunt. The mosaic features four leopards, each with its own name. There's beefy Romanus and Luxurius up top, and in the bottom corners the unlucky Crispinus and Victor.

The big cats are paired against four hunters, or *venatores*, whose names (Mamertinus, Bullarius, Hilarinus, and Spittara) are also preserved for the ages—along with the spurting blood of the slain leopards, the stabbing spears of the hunters, and even Spittara's stilts, which surely added a level of difficulty when fighting off a cornered leopard. There's even a herald carrying bags of money to reward the successful *venatores*.

The mosaic is evidence not just of the animal hunts and their popularity but also of the relationship between the crowd and *editor*, or sponsor, of gladiatorial games. By paying animal fighters handsomely, Magerius shows the crowd his generosity and importance.



The Magerius Mosaic was found in modern-day Libya.

From the text included in the mosaic, a little like a comic strip's word bubble, it seems he was richly rewarded, at least if you believe the way he chose to commemorate the afternoon in mosaic form. "By your example let future generations learn of the show and how it was staged!" the crowd cries. "You put it on at your own expense! This is your day!"

When the bags of money are handed over, the mosaic's real message is revealed. Calling the shots at a public spectacle, handing out rewards to chosen fighters, buying exotic animals just to watch them killed? "That's what it is to be rich! That's what it is to be powerful!"

Animal fighters were often lightly armed, sometimes facing down lions and bears with nothing more than a shield and spear.





To the average Roman, elephants in the arena would have been unimaginably exotic—and a reminder of the empire's power and reach.

for animals. When the Colosseum in Rome was inaugurated in A.D. 80, the emperor Titus baptized it with the blood of 5,000 wild beasts over the course of 100 straight days of spectacles. Nearly 30 years later, the emperor Trajan—not to be outdone—paid to import 11,000 animals for fights in the arena in the course of a single year to celebrate a major military victory. Nearly 2,000 years later, archaeologists excavating the Colosseum found the bones of bears, lions, vultures, and other animals among the ancient stones.

Literary sources record even more exotic creatures, with everything from hippos and rhinos to elephants and giraffes appearing in the amphitheater to the delight of spectators. The more unfamiliar or unlikely, the better: The bloody sand of the arena might be the only opportunity most people would have to encounter crea-

tures they knew mostly from travelers' tales. "Seeing a giraffe in Rome, that's super cool," says Harvard's Kathleen Coleman.

Not all Romans enjoyed the staged hunts, of course. The outcomes weren't that surprising, after all. "What pleasure can it possibly be to a man of culture," the writer Cicero practically sighed in a letter written around 55 B.C., "when either a puny human being is mangled by a most powerful beast, or a splendid beast is transfixed with a hunting-spear?"

Yet, the enduring popularity of these spectacles is proof most ancient Romans were fans of the animal fights. The *venationes* endured even after gladiators, once the main attractions, were no longer competing in the arena.



A bust of Emperor Augustus (r. 27 B.C.–A.D. 14)

A SHIFT IN THE GAMES

By A.D. 400, the moral compass of the declining Roman Empire had shifted as a result of the spread of Christianity. Bans on gladiatorial games were first imposed in A.D. 325 by Emperor Constantine I, and spectacles were abolished completely in the early 400s by Emperor Honorius. Animal fights, however, persisted for centuries thereafter. (Arguably, they've lasted to this day, most prominently in the form of arena bullfights and clandestinely in backyard dog- and cockfights.) "Religious scruples about killing other human beings did become a factor, but

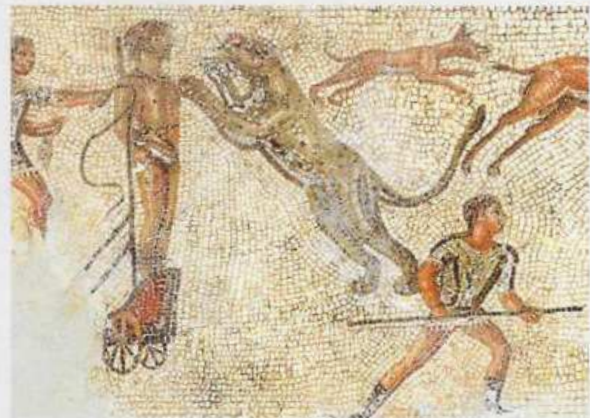
the venationes continued—animal killing wasn't a problem," says Welch. "Venationes were going strong when the gladiators were gone."

Ultimately, experts say, the animal fights were about more than the combat itself. Together with gladiator fights and public executions, the exhibitions rolled imperial propaganda and nature documentaries into one. The poet Claudian wrote about the effort and spectacle that the Romans undertook, noting that "boats laden with some of the animals traverse seas and rivers . . . Others are transported over land in wagons that block the roads with the long

MARTYRS AND MYTHS: CHRISTIANS AND THE ARENA

Some of the most well-known victims of the gladiator games were early Christians. Because they refused to sacrifice to Roman gods—or acknowledge the godlike status of the emperor—Christians were persecuted as criminals. This often meant they met their ends in brutal and very public ways, just like Jesus' Crucifixion. The Roman Empire's many amphitheaters were often the sites of public executions, and as a result, many persecuted Christians died in the same arenas where gladiators fought. But that doesn't mean they were gladiators themselves—in fact, they were far from it.

There are many reports of Christians condemned to *damnatio ad bestias*, or "death by animal." This particular punishment was reserved for those deemed to have committed egregious crimes, including murder and treason. A Roman-era mosaic discovered in what is now Libya is an elaborate re-creation of a Roman spectacle. Known as the Zliten mosaic, it features accurately rendered gladiator fights in several panels, along with musicians and entertainers. There are also two men strapped to wheeled contraptions as slaves or animal handlers push them closer to snarling lions. Nearby, a leopard is eating someone's face. The whole spectacle is brutal, but at



Criminals—and Christians—were indeed fed to lions in gory public executions.

the time it was considered entertainment, amusing enough to commemorate in the form of an elaborate mosaic one might show guests over a nice dinner. It is unclear if those depicted in the mosaic were Christians, but it is illustrative of the fates many Roman followers of this new religion endured.

When Christian teachings took hold across the empire, violent games declined in popularity. Even so, recounting the Roman spectacles became a favorite topic for early Christian writers. An obvious obsession, their portrayal has echoed through history and informed how we see the games today.

HYPOGEUM

Beneath the floor of the Colosseum is a cavernous maze of stone and brick pillars and passageways. Today, visitors can peer into it from the stands high above, but during the amphitheater's glory days, the underground space—which Romans called the *hypogeum*—was covered by a thick wooden platform strewn with sand.

Restoration work in the late 1990s on the arena understory gave German Archaeological Institute researcher Heinz-Jürgen Beste, an expert on ancient Greek and Roman buildings and architecture, the opportunity to fully document the hypogeum. Mapping distinctive sockets and notches on the pillars and walls of the lower level's vaulted corridors, he argued it was once filled with complex equipment, including dozens of elevators and machinery.

Beste re-created the layout, showing the rails that would have allowed specially built animal cages to slide into place and hatches for painted sets and scenery to move in and out of the floor. The ancient Romans' goal in using the hypogeum was to mimic the thick forests of Germany or the palm trees of North Africa to add a touch of realism to the appearance of bears, elk, or lions in the arena. (The system was later imitated at other regional amphitheaters, including a well-preserved structure in the town of Pozzuoli near Naples.)

All this was manned by a crew of hundreds. Beste calculates that at least 224 people were at work below the floor, with 28 elevator winches manned by eight men hunched over in the cramped space, straining in near darkness

to hear cues provided by trumpets and drums in the arena above.

After months of quiet, the days leading up to a *munera* in the Colosseum would have been a rush of preparation. "I imagine it as a sailing ship that hadn't been used in a while," Beste says. "You have to get everything dusted off and pull out the sails to get ready."

The analogy is apt in more ways than one. Beste says the stagehands and technicians who manned

the Colosseum would have included experienced seafarers. Inscriptions suggest some were even drawn from the ranks of the Roman navy and housed in barracks in the city center for big events. Sailors would have been familiar with ropes and winches and capable of unfurling the sail-like awnings that shaded the vast amphitheater's stands. The technicians would have been supplemented by animal handlers capable of wrangling lions, leopards, bears, and other ferocious beasts into place for their big reveals.

The stakes were high. The Colosseum was the most high-profile venue in the Roman Empire, with games typically sponsored by the emperor himself. Just as a



An elaborate system of elevators and trapdoors was used to release animals into the middle of the arena at Rome's Colosseum.

well-run spectacle reflected glory on the emperor, any mistake would be an embarrassment: According to the biographer Suetonius, the emperor Claudius occasionally forced carpenters and other technicians to fight impromptu death matches "as punishment for the failure of any mechanical device or unsatisfactory stage effect."

"If it doesn't work, it's a problem for the emperor," Beste says. "And if it's a problem for the emperor, it's a problem for the people putting it on."

"This is the world to which you belong. This is Rome."

procession." Transporting exotic creatures from the wild all the way to Rome to display them in the arena was a way to express the empire's mastery over not just far-flung territories but also over nature itself. "They're effectively bringing captive barbarians and wild animals into the center of the metropolis," says archaeologist Jonathan Coulston. "It's turning the world inside out—you get an urban audience watching natural monsters and exotic foreigners. It's reinforcing the idea of Rome's reach and civilizing mission."

In a world without television, radio, or newspapers, the appearance of wild, exotic

animals in the arena would have been a tremendous event—and would have delivered a tremendous message to the citizens. "You're showing people 'Rome is so large we have lions, hippos, even giraffes,'" agrees Alain Genot, an archaeologist at the museum of antiquities in Arles, France. "It's showing off Roman power through the arena. We're bringing it all the way from Africa, and now we are going to kill it for your pleasure."

This is the world to which you belong.

This is Rome."



A first-century A.D. bowl found in London shows lions and leopards in the arena.

Bears, too, made formidable opponents. This mosaic unearthed in Germany decorated the house of a wealthy Roman.



Few movies have had the impact of *Gladiator*, starring Russell Crowe (right) and directed by Ridley Scott.



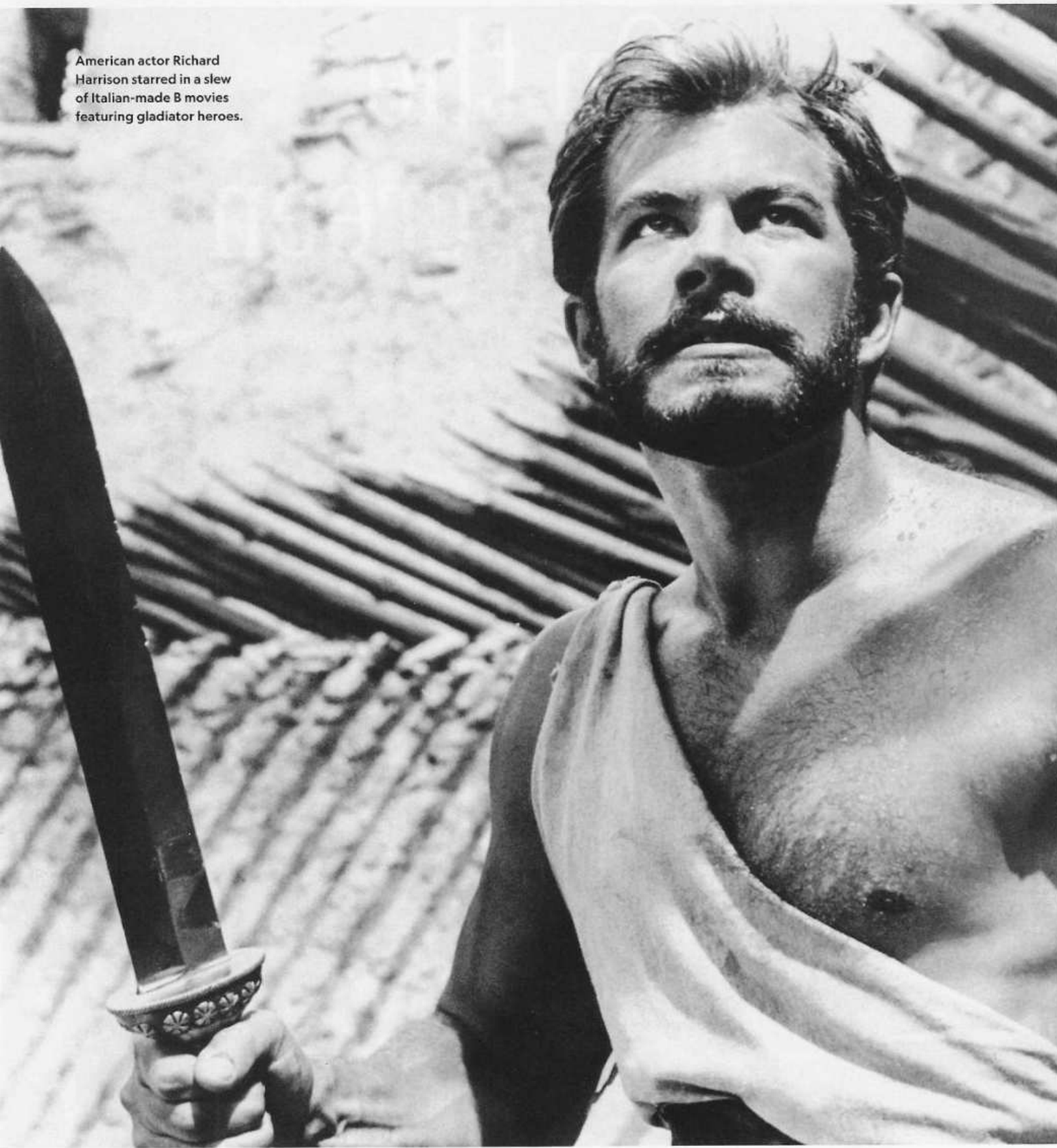
CHAPTER IV

On the Silver Screen

There hasn't been much innovation in more than a century of so-called sword-and-sandal movies. That hasn't stopped audiences from flocking to watch gladiators on the big screen.



American actor Richard Harrison starred in a slew of Italian-made B movies featuring gladiator heroes.





T

THE SCENE IS FAMILIAR: The sun beats down on the sand of the arena. Our hero—a man of honor who by some plot device has been enslaved and forced into shame—squints up at the faces of the crowd gathered to watch him die.

His opponents come swarming out, face-covering helmets obscuring their features. Blood spurts like fountains from severed arms, decapitated heads fly through the air like soccer balls, and swords clatter onto the ground.

At some point the tigers come out, snarling and pacing. At the critical moment, the hero's sword is knocked out of his hand to ratchet the drama up just one more notch.

He's probably not alone: He might have a friend in the arena. A big, slow guy is probably there too, either to kill or protect him.

At the end, the hero is left alone in the ring; vast

crowds that once bayed for his blood are now chanting his name.

HOLLYWOOD MEETS THE ANCIENT WORLD

Maybe you grew up with the Ridley Scott blockbuster *Gladiator*, which resurrected a whole genre when it was released in 2000 and spawned two decades of special effects-laden historical epics set in ancient Greece and Rome. Or maybe you came of age with the slightly more sedate gladiator movies of the 1950s and '60s that featured a slightly less chiseled set of pecs and abs belonging to the likes of Kirk Douglas or Victor Mature.

Those mid-20th-century films marked the first peak of Hollywood's obsession with all things Roman. In buttoned-up postwar America, glad-

iators provided a convenient plot device to slip violence and bare skin into movies with nominally Christian themes.

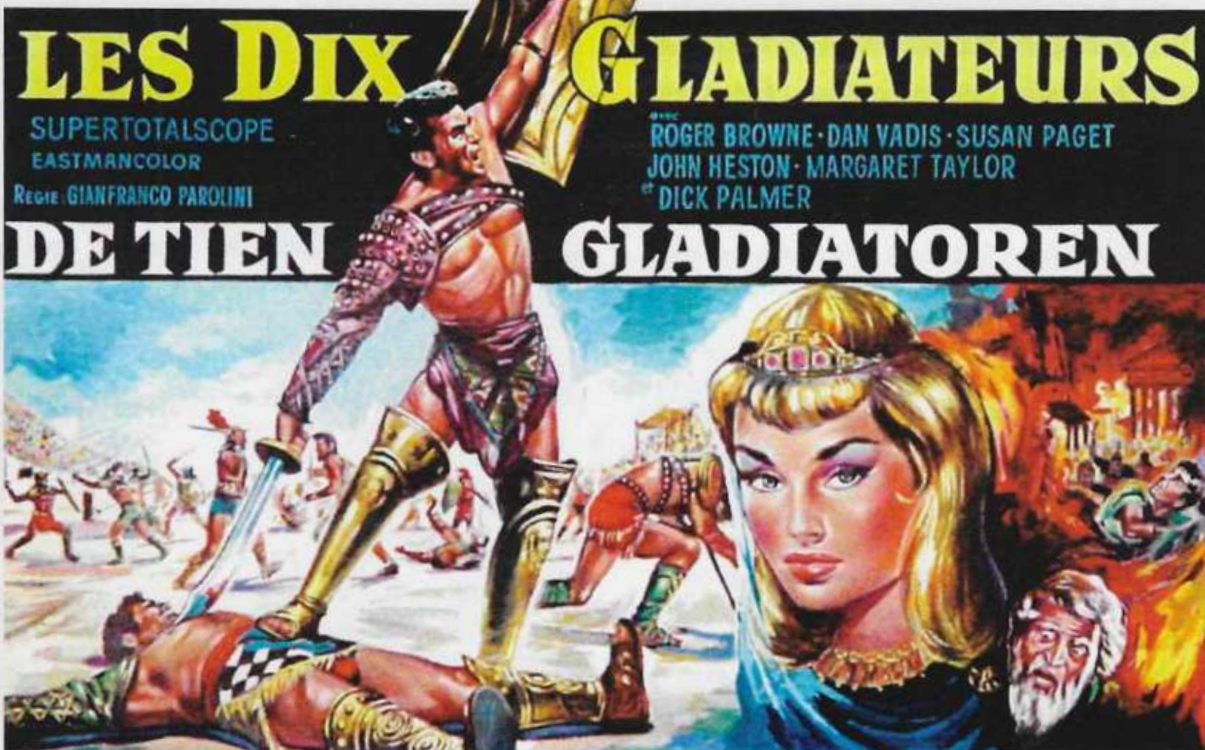
In 1954, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* featured a peace-loving Christian slave who has a crisis of faith after triumphing in the arena. (It's in Technicolor! There are tigers!) In the same vein, but with a marginally more believable plot, *Ben-Hur*, released in 1959, set box-office records and swept the Oscars, winning everything from Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director to Best Costume Design.

The following year, *Spartacus* was another massive box-office success, unleashing a flood of derivatives and an entire genre of low-budget Italian knockoffs. As the poster for the 1960 epic advertised, Rome and its gladiators have always promised audiences

Combat, Christianity, swooning heroines—sword-and-sandal movies like *Demetrius and the Gladiators* had it all.



PEPLUM FILMS



Cheap to make and dub, "peplum" movies were a 1960s staple before giving way to spaghetti Westerns.

Named after the peplos, a characteristic Greek women's draped garment, peplum films were the sword-and-sandal precursors to the spaghetti Western genre. Produced by the dozens in Italy in the early 1960s, they were dubbed into English, German, and other languages, and they became worldwide sensations.

The genre's first hit was *Hercules*, a 1958 flick starring the American bodybuilder Steve Reeves. To the surprise of almost everyone involved, *Hercules* was a huge success. Between 1958 and 1965, Italian studios followed up with dozens of low-budget movies set in ancient Rome and Greece, including *The Invincible Gladiator*, *The Two Gladiators*, *Seven Rebel Gladiators*, *The Ten Gladiators*, *Triumph of the Ten Gladiators*,

and *Spartacus and the Ten Gladiators*.

Gladiators were staples, but peplum directors mined myth and fantasy in increasingly unlikely ways. Dubbed in a variety of languages and often with beefy American B-list movie stalwarts like Richard Harrison and Dan Vadis in the lead roles, plot was rarely the point: Interchangeable fight scenes and bronzed skin kept audiences enthralled.



The peplum era was short-lived, fading out in the mid-1960s as audiences lost interest. Italian studios shifted to follow popular tastes, moving from films set in ancient Rome and Greece to so-called

spaghetti Westerns focused on a different, more rugged kind of action hero—the tormented gunslinger of the American West.

BEN-HUR

The saga of Jewish nobleman Judah Ben-Hur may be one of the most adapted in film history. In 1907, barely 25 years after Lew Wallace's best-selling 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* was published, it was adapted into one of film's first silent shorts. A full-length silent movie was released in 1927, but the 1959 blockbuster starring Charlton Heston—and featuring the best known chariot racing scene in film history—brought *Ben-Hur* to a new generation of audiences and made it synonymous with sword-and-sandal flicks. Since 2000, *Ben-Hur* has been adapted twice more, into an animated movie and a special effects-laden 2016 “reimagination.”

The unlikely story of how Jewish prince Ben-Hur works his way from galley slave to champion charioteer—and eyewitness to the Crucifixion of Jesus—isn't actually about gladiators, but its many adaptations show over-the-top portrayals of the Roman world were popular with audiences. The “spectacularly successful Victorian novel and an equally popular stage show before the famous film versions,” University of Leicester archaeologist Simon James wrote in 2013, “had an unequalled impact on the entertainment, religious instruction and even formal education of several generations across the United States, the Anglophone world and beyond.” For more than 140 years, in other words, Ben-Hur's various portrayals of Roman life and history have proven remarkably resilient in the popular imagination, even though they're often inaccurate.

TRUE: Chariot races rivaled gladiatorial games in terms of popularity. The Circus Maximus in Rome was built to hold a stunning 250,000 spectators, larger than any stadium today.

FALSE: The Romans didn't use galley slaves, chained or otherwise, to propel their warships.

Charlton Heston's turn as Ben-Hur was instantly iconic, thanks in part to the drama of its chariot race scene.



TRUE OR FALSE?



Gladiators have always promised audiences “everything that makes entertainment great!”

“everything that makes entertainment great!”

The genre offered ample moral quandaries: Would the bloodlust of the arena lead the Christian gladiator to question his faith? Could friendships forged in the gladiator school survive the kill-or-be-killed environment of the arena? Who would the audience side with, the enslaved gladiator or his masters?

There was tension, too: Who would win in the ring, the hero or the lumbering giant in a full-face helmet? And there was ample skin, usually of the shirtless

male variety, complemented by comely female stars in diaphanous, low-cut Roman dresses. Unlike in real life, the endings were almost always happy.

Hollywood's swords-and-sandals era arguably fizzled out, appropriately, in 1964 with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, a sprawling, three-hour epic starring Sophia Loren as a Roman empress and Alec Guinness as the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Despite the largest outdoor set in Hollywood history—a 990,000-square-foot (92,000 m²) reproduction of

I AM SPARTACUS!

Little is known about the life of Spartacus, history's most famous gladiator. Ancient writers report Spartacus was a Thracian, born in what is today Bulgaria or Greece. He may have started his adult life as a Roman soldier. How he wound up a prisoner, condemned to a gladiator school in the Roman city of Capua, is unclear.

Between 73 and 71 B.C., Spartacus and his fellow gladiators roamed Italy, ransacking rich country estates and gathering enslaved people and impoverished Roman farmers to their cause. After fending off several attacks by the Roman army, Spartacus's forces were finally defeated in battle.

The rebellion left lasting scars on the Roman psyche: Roman society was heavily dependent on the labor of enslaved people, and the idea of a potential internal threat capable of overturning the social order

was terrifying. After their defeat, survivors were harshly, and publicly, punished. Centuries later, writers were still rehashing the events, suggesting that fears of another revolt by the many enslaved people still toiling for Roman society weighed heavily on the minds of elite Romans.

Spartacus, as described by Plutarch, was larger than life, with “a great spirit and great physical strength . . . most intelligent and cultured, being more like a Greek than a Thracian.” Writers also emphasize the financial motivations of the enslaved people who fought alongside Spartacus to minimize the strong feelings they might have had about the institution of slavery and the status quo of Roman leadership. “The stories the Romans told themselves about Spartacus,” University of Arizona historian

Alison Futrell writes in her book *The Roman Games*, “are shaped by what they needed to know about this blot on their impressive record of victory and control.”

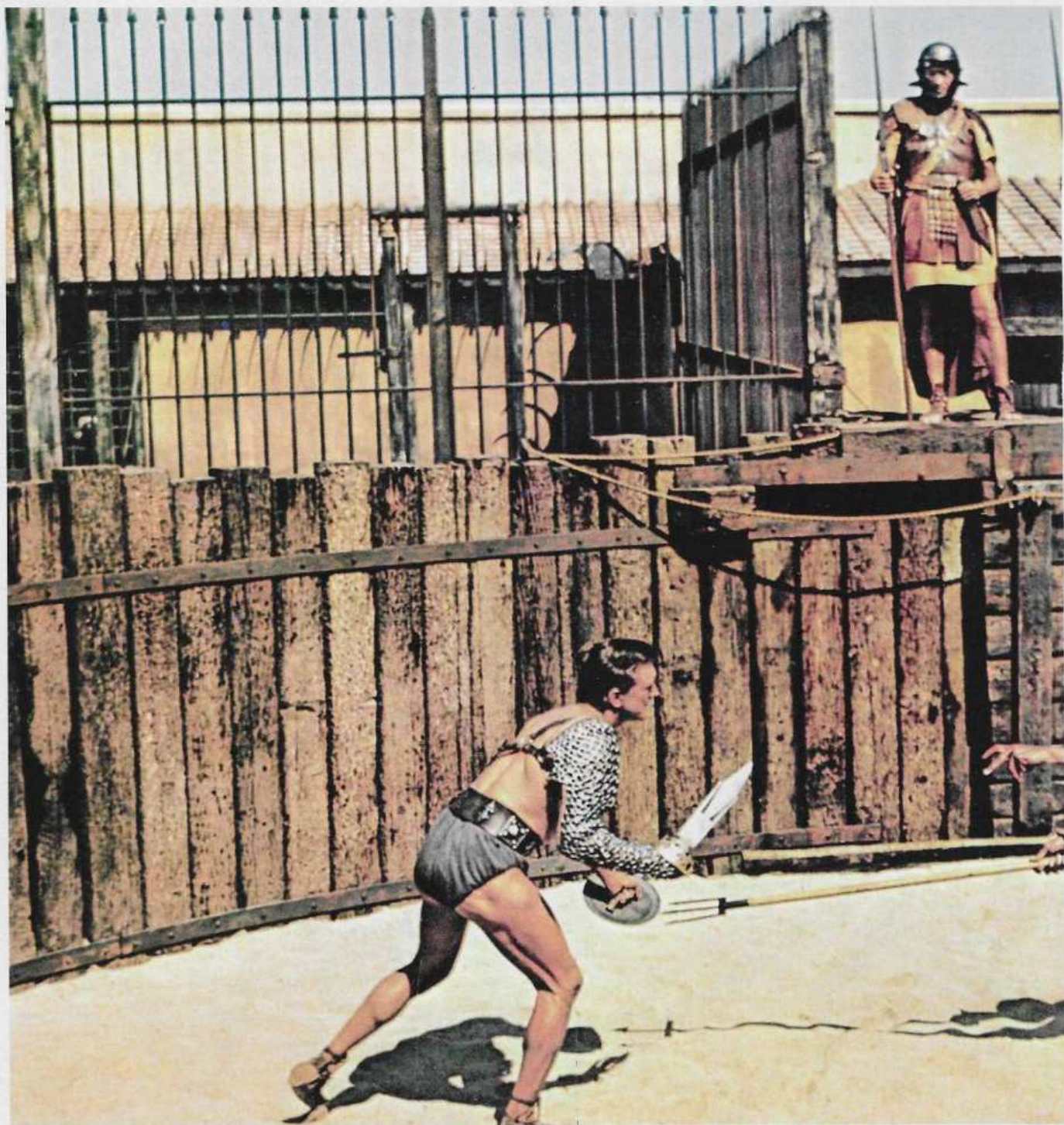


Spartacus led a slave revolt against Rome.



Sophia Loren and Stephen Boyd starred in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, a 1964 epic that flopped at the box office.

TRUE OR FALSE?





SPARTACUS

Based on the life of the legendary leader of a slave revolt that nearly succeeded, the 1960 film made fledgling director Stanley Kubrick—just 30 years old when he signed on to direct it—a household name. Its strong and explicit condemnations of enslavement—“Even at the zenith of her pride and power, the Republic lay fatally stricken with the disease called human slavery,” the opening voice-over intones—came during the civil rights movement and were powerful at the time.

Just as provocative was its screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo. When the film was released, Trumbo had spent more than a decade on a blacklist after refusing to testify during the McCarthy hearings. Kirk Douglas himself, playing Spartacus, insisted on crediting Trumbo, effectively breaking the blacklist. Spartacus has long been a communist icon, ever since Karl Marx called him “the most splendid fellow in the whole of ancient history . . . [a] real representative of the ancient proletariat.”

TRUE: Second-century Greek historian Appian of Alexandria claims the 6,000 or so survivors of the slave army’s last stand were crucified “all along the road from Rome to Capua.” And in the film, the gladiator school where Spartacus trains is depicted as prisonlike, with tall, spiked iron fences and wary armed guards. Literary sources suggest this was accurate—although at the time it was an exception, worth pointing out as unusually cruel.

FALSE: The film’s most famous scene comes at the very end, when Spartacus is crucified with hundreds of his men. But literary sources say he died bravely in battle, making a lone last stand against Roman soldiers.

Forty years before *Gladiator*, there was *Spartacus*, starring Kirk Douglas (left) as the rebellious gladiator turned general.



Cynthia Addai-Robinson plays a female warrior in the bloody Starz TV series *Spartacus*, which ran from 2010 to 2013.

the Roman Forum—and settings ranging from the German frontier to Armenia, the film was a financial and critical flop.

It would take almost four decades before *Gladiator* reignited the love affair. Directed by Ridley Scott and starring a buff Russell Crowe, it won five Oscars and netted nearly half a billion dollars at the box office. It went on to spur interest in the ancient world—sometimes described as the “*Gladiator* effect”—with a flood of big-screen historical epics like *300* and *Troy*, set in other eras throughout the ancient world. Historians, meanwhile, mostly cringed: The list of historical errors in the movie is so long that Harvard historian Kathleen Coleman, hired to ensure the



A peplum film poster from 1964

film’s accuracy, asked not to be listed as a consultant in the credits—and later wrote about her misadventures and frustrations in an essay titled “The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant.”

But filmmakers cannot resist returning to Rome. From movies like *Pompeii*, *The Eagle*, and another *Ben-Hur* in 2016, to TV series such as HBO’s *Rome*, Starz’s *Spartacus*, and more documentaries than anyone can count, gladiators, charioteers, legionaries, and barbarians have become familiar sights on our TV and cinema screens.

Are you not entertained?

Fights in the arena
(here, Jamie Bell in 2011's
The Eagle) are a pop
culture mainstay.



GLADIATOR

In the modern era, few films have had the impact that *Gladiator* did when it debuted in 2000. It earned nearly \$500 million in theaters, won five Oscars—including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director—and continues to be an audience favorite.

In retrospect, its success was far from preordained. In a later interview, director Ridley Scott said he signed on to direct without ever looking at a script; many of the film's most quoted lines were made up on the spot, which star Russell Crowe admitted was "the dumbest way possible to make a film." The actor who played the *lanista* of the gladiator school, Oliver Reed, died partway through filming, and his scenes had to be finished using a body double with Reed's face digitally superimposed.

Critics weren't so kind, either. The late Roger Ebert gave it a lukewarm two stars and said the movie "employs depression as a substitute for personality, and believes that if the characters are bitter and morose enough, we won't notice how dull they are."

TRUE: The emperor Commodus was obsessed with gladiators and, according to ancient authors, enjoyed dressing as one and making appearances in the arena of the Roman Colosseum.

FALSE: Many falsehoods are perpetuated—gladiators fought one-on-one, not in mass battles as filmed; leadership of the Roman Empire wasn't decided by single combat; and Roman armies didn't employ catapults and other heavy equipment in the thick forests of Germany.

Russell Crowe plays general turned gladiator Maximus Decimus Meridius in the 2000 blockbuster *Gladiator*.



TRUE OR FALSE?



GLADIATORS

THE REAL STORY OF THE RING

ANDREW CURRY

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PARTNERS, LLC
1145 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036-4688 USA

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ISSN 2160-7141

Published by Meredith Corporation
225 Liberty Street • New York, NY 10281

Printed in the USA

Special thanks to Jill Foley, Marshall Kiker, and Matt Probert.

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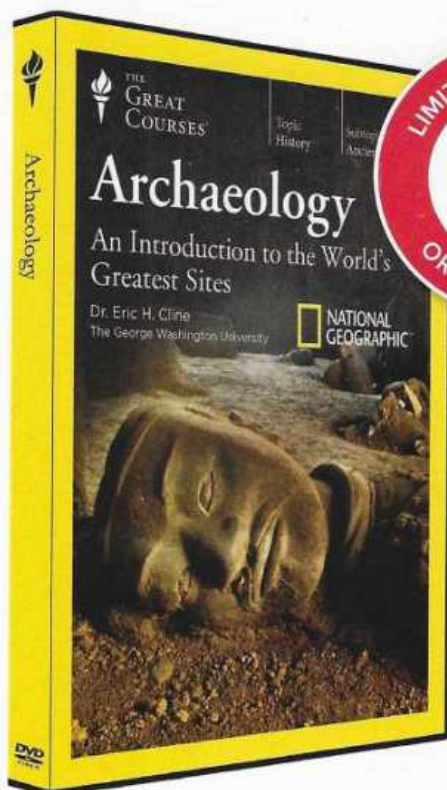
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Special thanks to the Archaeological Park of Pompeii,
Italy; Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid; the Museo
Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy; the Museum het
Valkhof, Nijmegen, Netherlands; the Museum für Kunst und
Gewerbe Hamburg, Germany; and the Musée Départemental
Arles Antique, France.

Opposite: Found near Seville, Spain, the Tabula Gladiatoria from
the second century A.D. recommended fixed prices for gladiators
to control the spiraling costs of spectacles.

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